YESTERDAY'S HARVEST

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YESTERDAY'S HARVEST
TO-MORROW'S TANGLE
RED ASHES
WAVES OF DESTINY
THE BARBARIAN LOVER
THE VISION OF DESIRE
THE MOON OUT OF REACH
THE LAMP OF FATE
THE SPLENDID FOLLY
THE HERMIT OF FAR END
THE HOUSE OF DREAMS-COME-TRUE

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GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

YESTERDAY'S HARVEST

BY

MARGARET PEDLER

"YESTERDAY This Day's Madness did prepare;
TO-MORROW'S Silence, Triumph, or Despair."

RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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BY MARGARET PEDLER

YESTERDAY'S HARVEST

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PROLOGUE

I

"MISS GRANTON"—the voice held a sharp, querulous, complaining note in it—"Miss Granton, I've left my fan upstairs. Just run up and fetch it, will you?"

The girl addressed turned rather wearily to obey. She was used to that irritable voice. For a little over a year now it had been the dominating note in her existence, directing her uprising and downsitting, and settling every detail of her daily life—usually on lines that were utterly and entirely distasteful to her. But she was drearily aware that when you happen to be a poor and distant relation—very poor and very distant—you have to accept what comes and make the best of a bad job.

She had honestly tried to do this, tried for one whole, interminable year, during which she had occupied the unenviable position of "companion-help" to Mrs. Damerell. And now she was sick of it—sick of brushing and combing snappy, pampered little dogs, of fetching and carrying, and of doing all the disagreeable odds and ends that other people had left undone. Above all, sick of the daily, hourly contrast between her own drab, colourless existence and the rippling, jewelled life of the woman who employed her.

It rushed over her anew, that exasperating sense of contrast, as she sped through the hall and mounted the staircase in search of Mrs. Damerell's missing fan. Halfway up the first flight she paused and looked back upon the scene she had just quitted—the hall ablaze with rosy lights, banks of flowers filling it with scent and colour, servants passing swiftly to and fro, putting last touches to the tables in the supper-room beyond, whilst from the ball-room came the sparkling, syncopated lilt of fox-trot music. Her last glimpse, as she turned the bend of the staircase, was of Mrs. Damerell herself, crossing the hall, arrayed in a wonderful frock of some shimmering golden tissue, her gold hair gleaming like silk from the deft hands of her maid. She was accompanied by a couple of men, one on either side of her—tall, laughing men, men who wore just the right sort of clothes, bending towards her with that touch of charming deference mankind is wont to accord to rich and pretty womanhood.

It was all merely a question of money, the girl told herself harshly, as she continued her way slowly upstairs, a question of the luck which endowed one woman with a plain hemstitched life and another with a life that was elaborately embroidered. She herself could be just as charming as Mrs. Damerell, she felt, given the latter's leisured wealth and opportunity. There were moments when she longed indescribably, unbearably, for the lovely frocks and jewels, the smooth ease of living, which by dint of use and habit were all taken placidly for granted by Mrs. Damerell.

She entered the latter's bedroom and switched on the shaded lights with a sharp turn of nervous, irritable fingers. Here, again, the detailed luxury of the room smote her bitterly once more. Oh, it was unfair—

wickedly unfair that one woman should have so much and another so little!

She moved slowly towards the dressing-table. Amid a profusion of gold-backed toilet accessories lay the fan of which she had come in search—a sweep of long, flame-coloured ostrich plumes curling softly over on the polished surface.

As she lifted it, something tapped lightly against her fingers. Glancing quickly down, she saw that the clasp of a slender string of pearls had become entangled in the feathers of the fan in such a way that the necklace was dangling from it. Evidently Mrs. Damerell must have laid the fan carelessly down on the top of the pearls, hiding them from sight, and then gone downstairs, completely oblivious of the fact. She had so many pearls, the girl reflected hardly, as her fingers busied themselves disengaging the clasp.

It was rather a difficult task to free it without breaking the delicate tendrils of ostrich feather, but at last it was accomplished and the necklace lay loosely coiled in the palm of her hand. Though not of outstanding size, the pearls were wonderfully matched and of a soft dawn-pink in colour—a rare string and far more valuable than the girl in her young ignorance imagined. She regarded it curiously. Its owner must prize it very lightly to have left it lying about in that careless fashion, she thought. But then—Mrs. Damerell had so many pearls. She remembered noticing that she was wearing three strings that evening, each one longer than the other, one of them, presumably the most valuable of them all, a hip-length ripple of moonlight against the shimmering gold tissue frock.

Tentatively the girl lifted the necklace she had found

and clasped it round her throat. It was tantalisingly lovely—the lustrous gleam of the pearls against that young, white neck. She wished they were hers—pearls had always held an odd, almost irresistible allure for her, She fingered them softly, greedily. It was such a little string in comparison with Mrs. Damerell's others; she would surely hardly miss it. With the thought, a rush of burning colour stained her cheeks. She felt hot all over at the idea which had flashed unbidden into her mind. It would be theft—theft to take the pearls, of course. But not to borrow them for a short time—just to wear in secret once or twice in her own tiny, roof-high bedroom upstairs, to revel for a little while in their sheer, glistening beauty.

Mrs. Damerell would discover her loss, naturally, sooner or later, and then, when that time came and the hue and cry was raised, she might say that she had picked them up somewhere—anywhere—and return them. It would be easy enough to think of a likely place where they might have fallen unnoticed from the neck of their owner, and she could pretend that she had found them. She felt nearly sure that Mrs. Damerell was unaware that she was not actually wearing them at the moment. She had almost certainly placed them on the dressing-table with the intention of wearing them that night together with her other strings of pearls, then had accidentally covered them with her fan and descended to the ball-room without putting them on.

A footstep sounded in the corridor outside. Hastily the girl unclasped the necklace from round her throat, crushing it up into the hollow of her hand as a house-maid entered the room to prepare it for the night. She was still playing with her idea of keeping the pearls in

her possession for a few hours, hesitating over it, afraid, yet longing hungrily to do it, and the sudden entrance of the maid flustered her, rushing her into frantic decision. For some inexplicable reason she felt compelled to offer an explanation of her presence in the room.

"I—I came to fetch Mrs. Damerell's fan. She left it upstairs," she volunteered hastily. And then, turning impulsively, she left the room, the pearls still hidden in her hand.

II

Moonlight, threading with slim, tremulous white fingers the foliage of the trees. A garden—that small, infinitely precious space of garden which attaches to a few fortunate London houses—flung into deep shadow by the tall, surrounding buildings. And, vaguely adumbrated in the moon-flung shadow, a man and a girl alone together. Their voices mingled softly in a murmurous undertone, low cadences of youth calling to youth, while now and again a ripple of gay young laughter cascaded into the summer night. They were irresponsibly happy, in love with love and quite believing they were in love with each other. At twenty-two and seventeen respectively it is sometimes rather difficult to differentiate between the two states.

"We must go in." The girl spoke reluctantly. "Mrs. Damerell might need me for something or other, and then, if I wasn't on the spot when wanted, I should get into hot water."

The man gave vent to an exclamation of annoyance.

"Confound Mrs. Damerell!" He put his arm round the girl's shoulders and drew her to him with an eager,

boyish gesture. "Sweetness, I wish I could marry you right off and take you away from all this"—nodding his head in the direction of the house. "Only I haven't a bean, worse luck!"

"So it can't be done." The girl laughed a little tremulously—a laugh ending on a sigh. "Never mind. You'll make money one day, and then we'll have our happy time."

"Yes, I shall make money one day." He spoke with an odd kind of confidence. "And I've a rich old godfather who'll probably weigh in with a goodish bit in the dim and distant future—when he has no more use for the stuff himself. But till then——" He paused, adding rather savagely after a moment: "Why the devil one never has the cash when one's young and could do something with it, heaven only knows!"

"Do you want money—now?" she asked with some anxiety.

He laughed carelessly, shrugging his shoulders.

"Do I ever *not* want money? But never mind, darling, it's not worth worrying about as long as I can square my card debts and so on. Tailors can wait; they're used to it. Let's go in and dance."

They retraced their steps to the house, and a few minutes later they were mingling with the other dancers in the ball-room.

The floor was overcrowded, as usual. Mrs. Damerell's invitations rarely met with a refusal. Everybody said that her shows were always better done than anyone else's, and everybody who could went to them and angled to take their friends with them in addition. It might pretty generally be hazarded that, on an evening like the present one, she and her husband were previously acquainted with, at the most, not more than three-quarters

of the people who were fox-trotting on their celebrated floor, eating their expensive supper, and drinking their even more expensive champagne.

So loosely knit a mesh of hospitality has its drawbacks. Now and again an undesirable visitor slips through, unnoticed amongst the throng of arriving guests, as once, when, on the occasion of a fancy dress ball, the Damerells had unwittingly entertained one of the smartest thieves in London at a cost to themselves of a twenty thousand pound *rivière* of diamonds which Mrs. Damerell had been wearing, and which he had neatly snipped from her neck at the very moment when she was innocently complimenting him upon the excellence of his dancing. The episode had made the Damerells nervous—particularly as the *rivière* was never recovered.

The man and the girl who had come in from the garden progressed slowly round the crowded ball-room, receiving now a dig from someone's elbow, now a none too light pressure from someone's foot, until finally the man pulled up.

"Good Lord! Call this dancing! It's more like a Rugger scrum," he said. "Let's cut it, shall we? See, here's a jolly little place"—he indicated a window alcove, half screened from the rest of the room by a heavy brocaded curtain. "Let's sit this one out."

His companion nodded agreement.

"Yes, do let's. I'm quite sore with being bumped into."

They sat down side by side in the alcove, easy chair drawn close to easy chair, once more as completely absorbed in themselves and each other as they had been in the moonlit garden. Time passes quickly enough in such circumstances, and it did not seem to either of them very

long before something unforeseen broke in upon their absorption. It was a voice, speaking rather loudly, yet at the same time somewhat nervously—Mr. Damerell's voice. It sounded almost as though ne were making a speech. The band had become suddenly silent, and the slurring whisper of dancing feet had ceased with the music. There were no rustlings, nothing of that just perceptible stir of movement almost inseparable from any concourse of people, however quiet they may be. The ball-room seemed all at once abnormally, preternaturally still—a void of tense silence into which Mr. Damerell's loud, nervous voice was falling, drop by drop, word by word.

"Hullo! What's up?" Unconsciously the man in the alcove spoke below his breath. He and the girl beside him both sat up, tautly listening. The first part of Mr. Damerell's speech had already passed them by, drifting futilely against the wall of their absorption. But it was easy enough to pick up the thread.

". . . and this is not the first but the second time such a thing has happened under my roof. The first time the thief escaped. This time I am determined that he shall *not*. That is why I telephoned to Scotland Yard to send their people along before apprising you of the loss of the pearls. My wife is quite certain that she was wearing them this evening. She remembers perfectly taking them out of her jewel case with other jewellery she proposed to wear. And this is corroborated by the fact that they are not there now. So that is the reason I have asked you all to pass quietly out of this room, one at a time, and submit to being searched. It will all be done as quickly and with as much consideration as possible, and I feel sure that all my friends here will be willing to help me

in this matter by consenting to what I realise is a somewhat drastic measure."

"Rather, old man! You can bank on us." A man's jolly voice answered heartily from amongst the crowd of guests. "I'll go first. Where's the inquisition to take place, eh, what?"

A murmured colloquy followed. Then the same good-humoured voice called out:

"Gentlemen to the right, ladies to the left, as you leave the ball-room. I'm sure we're all in this to help our hostess recover her pearls."

There came a general murmur of assent, followed by the buzz of rapid question and surmise. And then, all at once, the man in the alcove became conscious of a scared, whispering voice close at his side.

"What shall I do? What shall I do?"

He turned and saw the face of the girl beside him, chalk-white, her eyes dilated and frantic like those of a trapped wild animal.

"Do? Why, nothing. It's a beastly business, of course, but you needn't worry," he said reassuringly. "They'll have women searchers, you know. They'll be quite nice to you in a case like this."

"'Nice to me'?" She gave a shrill, hysterical little laugh. "But they'll *find* them!"

"Find them? Find what?"

"The pearls. I've got them. I took them—I never meant to keep them." It all came tumbling out in spasmodic, terrified gasps. "What am I to do?" She shook her small clenched fists impotently in the air. "What am I to *do?*" she wailed.

"You mean—you took Mrs. Damerell's pearls?" he asked slowly, incredulously.

"Yes"—with gathering excitement. "She sent me up to fetch her fan. She'd forgotten to put them on—they were on the dressing-table. Lovely, lovely things—and I took them. . . . They're here." She unclasped her wrist-bag—a dainty trifle of brocade and gold embroidery given to her the previous Christmas by Mrs. Damerell, and there, snug against the oyster-pink lining, lay the pearls. The man stared at them.

"God!" The exclamation seemed jerked out of him, escaping his lips with a repressed violence of recoil. "Were you mad?"

"Yes, I think I must have been." Then, the whole desperateness of the situation rushing over her once more: "What shall I do? Oh, what *am* I to do?"

The sheer terror in her voice steadied him.

"We must get rid of them."

"But how?" She looked wildly round. "How can I?"

"Give them to me. I'll get rid of them for you. Drop them somewhere, or shove 'em under a cushion. This curtain might do." He held out his hand and, like a thin stream of beaded moonlight, the pearls slid from the little wrist-bag into his palm. His fingers closed round them, hiding them from sight. Almost in the same instant someone pulled aside the curtain which shielded the alcove and looked in.

"Hullo, you in here? This is a nice business, isn't it?" said the new-comer. He was a little man, on the shady side of forty, pink and smiling, with a chubby face crinkled about the eyes with ready laughter. He exuded easy good-nature at every pore. "Feelin' ready for the fray, Miss Granton?" he went on loquaciously.

The girl forced her terrified features to a set smile.

"I'm only hoping they'll be merciful to my frock, Mr.

Corbett," she said, trying to answer him as lightly as possible.

"I hope so, too," he agreed heartily. "A deuced pretty frock like that."

"And a frock's a frock these hard times," she gave back. She was speaking randomly to cover her nervousness. Meanwhile, the man beside her had slipped his hand unobtrusively into his pocket and now withdrew it —empty. Corbett interpreted the gesture according to his lights.

"Left your case at home? Have one of mine." He tendered his cigarette-case. "And you, too, Miss Granton. Steadies the nerves a bit, y'know. Personally, I'd give a thunderin' lot for a stiff brandy and soda at the present moment. Not that I'm afraid of bein' searched" —with a jolly laugh. "But they're sure to find the poor devil who's pinched the pearls, and—oh, damn it! I shall hate to see him collared."

He prattled on cheerfully, while Miss Granton's replies grew more and more haphazard. Would the man never go—give them a chance to get rid of the pearls? The face of the man who had relieved her of her burden was growing rather white and strained-looking. It was a lean young face with a hint of recklessness about the eyes and mouth—a certain devil-may-care daring that was not the least part of its charm.

"Well, I suppose we'd better be gettin' a move on," suggested Corbett, glancing towards the end of the ballroom where the guests were hanging about the guarded doorway in restless, uncomfortable little groups. "Ranks seem to be thinnin' a bit. Gettin' near our turn, eh?"

"I suppose so," replied the younger man mechanically. But he made no movement to go. His eyes held a curious

look of concentration, as though he were calculating chances.

Corbett laughed. He laughed easily and often; life always seemed to him a cheery, jolly old show, don't you know.

"You don't sound very keen. Ha-ha! Got the pearls secreted on you, by any chance?" he inquired facetiously.

The other nodded. A momentary flash of grim humour crossed his face.

"That's it, of course," he said. "In my right-hand pocket."

Came the sound of footsteps approaching the alcove. A tall, quiet-looking man looked casually in, then paused.

"Do you mind coming this way?" he said courteously. "We shall soon be through now, if everyone will help by following on as quickly as possible."

"Whippin' us all in, aren't you?" said Corbett jovially. "Eh, what?"

"Very sorry to have to trouble you, sir," replied the new-comer, smiling. He was quite polite, almost apologetic in his manner; nevertheless, without seeming to do so, he shepherded the trio from the alcove, together with one or two other sitters-out he had rounded up, and inexorably towards the ball-room door.

They waited quietly, amongst other little groups of guests gathered there, also awaiting their turn. Every few minutes someone passed out, and the numbers within the ball-room dwindled.

"Will you come next, sir? And you, madam?"

One of the guardians at the door civilly addressed the man and girl who only an hour ago had been playing at love in the garden. A little moan escaped her, so slight—a mere tortured breath—that only one other heard it.

He looked down at her swiftly—a quick, tense look. For him, as well as for her, the voice of the man at the door knelled disaster. It resembled the closing of an iron gate. Opportunity had eluded them like some devil-prompted will-o'-the-wisp.

The man stepped forward, his head thrown back with a curious gesture of defiance.

"You needn't search me," he said quietly. "I'll save you the trouble. There are the pearls."

He held them out at arm's length, a drift of beaded moonlight dangling from his fingers.

CHAPTER I

VILLA ILARIO

THE dusky shadows of the afternoon had lengthened across the lake, shadows of the green-clad mountains ringing it round, so that one half of its placid waters lay dark and obscure, whilst over the other the slanting rays of the sun still played, transmuting it into a sheet of tremulous gold. On the sunlit surface floated a long, light boat, the scarlet awning arched across her making a gay splash of vivid colour against the surrounding green. A single pair of oars dipped now and then from her sides with a slow, lazy stroke that just sufficed to keep her from drifting backward with the current. Obviously the man at the sculls was more deeply intent on his thoughts than upon any progress the boat was making. His eyes were narrowed a little—curious slate-coloured eyes, coolly whimsical, yet with a latent warmth in their depths which suggested they might wake at times into sudden anger —and his lips were pressed together consideringly as though he were balancing certain pros and cons.

Opposite him, amongst the multicoloured cushions heaped up in the boat's stern, a woman sat leaning forward rather eagerly, her gaze riveted on his face. It was an appealing gaze, not only at this moment when she was waiting anxiously to know her husband's decision on the particular point under discussion, but perennially so. The childlike appeal of those speedwell blue eyes of hers had carried Violet Frayne very successfully through

life. That and a certain look of frailty which filled people with a desire to take care of her and keep the rough, rude edges of life away from her. Candover Frayne had been doing this ever since he married her, and with such success that now, at thirty, she still looked hardly more than a girl.

"Do speak!" she exclaimed at last, a little petulantly. The prolonged silence was getting on her nerves.

Frayne smiled.

"Impatient child! What do you want me to say?"

"You know what I want you to say—that my idea's a splendid one. It is, really."

"Put concisely, your idea is that you and I should go off on our own for several months?"

She nodded eagerly.

"Yes. Just you and I together, Candy. It will be like old times."

"And what's to become of Elizabeth?"

"Oh"—lightly. "I thought you'd arrange something. She's your daughter, isn't she? Not mine."

A faint look of displeasure crossed his face, and he made no answer. As is so often the case in second marriages, this was the one subject round which difficulties gathered—the subject of the child of his first marriage. It was not that Violet and she did not get on together. They did—and would have got on better still had their relationship been other than that of stepmother and stepdaughter. The trouble was that Violet wanted exclusive rights in her husband, as it were, a monopoly of possession which was impossible in view of the deep friendship—a comradeship based upon an oddly sensitive understanding of each other—which existed between father and daughter.

"After all, Candy"—Violet was speaking again, a note of almost passionate protest in her voice—"we've lived the most exemplary family life for a whole year now—ever since Elizabeth left school."

Frayne nodded reflectively. It was quite true. Since Elizabeth had shaken the dust of a finishing school from off her feet and proceeded to "grow up," he and Violet had abandoned the wandering, happy-go-lucky existence which had been theirs, and had made of Villa Ilario, Candover's villa on the borders of Lake Como, a permanent home. Previously they had regarded it as hardly more than a *pied-à-terre*—a jumping-off place from which, whenever the wander-fever caught hold of them afresh, they could start off on a trip to the wilds of South Africa—for Violet, notwithstanding her fragile, hot-house appearance, was an unexpectedly plucky traveller, and had many a time proved herself a thorough good sport over the hardships of a difficult journey—or on a leisurely, luxurious saunter through Europe.

But all that had been changed with Elizabeth's release from the trammels of school, and the Fraynes had settled down, more or less successfully, to a *ménage à trois*. Candover had been wont to consider that, on the whole, the balance was distinctly on the side of success. A threesome is always the least satisfactory kind of game to play, especially in life, and the triangular *ménage* at Villa Ilario had worked with apparent smoothness. But now he realised that beneath that surface smoothness other currents had been flowing. Violet, although she had concealed it pretty effectually, had been in reality fretting inwardly under the new order of things, and her next remark revealed the root of the trouble.

"I hardly seem to have had you to myself at all this

last year," she said. "And now, if we've got to go to England in a few months, to Frayne Abbey, and be buried alive in the country, I do think we might have a holiday together first. *Couldn't* we, Candy?" she finished up plaintively.

She looked very young and appealing, sitting there, her child's mouth drooping a little at the corners, her fair, curling hair, ruffled by the breeze, gleaming like pale gold in the sunshine. Frayne, who worshipped her blindly, as a man very often does worship a woman much younger than himself—she was sixteen years his junior—smiled across at her.

"I think we could, darling, if that's what you'd like. I'll have to have a talk with Elizabeth."

She nodded.

"It's what I'd like better than anything else—a few months' rambling about—just with you. Afterwards, you know, when we go to the Abbey, it will mean being cooped up there for the rest of our lives, I suppose."

A sudden shadow darkened his face. Was country life in England—the kind of life he himself liked better than any other—going to mean only a species of prison to her—to mean dullness and boredom and perpetual rebellion against her lot? It had meant that to his first wife, to Elizabeth's mother, and out of this had sprung the tragedy which had at one time threatened to break him altogether and had turned him, reckless with misery, into a wanderer upon the face of the earth, whilst strangers made their dwelling in the beautiful old Abbey which had been the home of the Fraynes for generations.

"You shall never be cooped up at Frayne against your will," he answered her. "Give it a trial, that's all I ask,

and if you don't like it we'll let the place and go abroad again."

"Do you mean that, Candy?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied quietly. "I mean it."

But Violet had no measure by which to gauge how much the utterance of those three short words cost him. The Abbey had been let for fifteen years, and for the last five or six of those years Candover had been filled with an aching longing to return there. The nostalgia for the home of his childhood, for the place that he had known and loved all his life, and which his fathers had known and loved before him, had seemed at times almost more than he could endure.

And the fact that it was by his own action that the Abbey gates were closed against him made it no easier to bear. In the first bitter recoil from everything once dear and familiar which overwhelmed him when disaster suddenly engulfed his life, he had instructed his lawyers to let the place. "Get rid of it. Let it for as long as you can. I never want to set eyes on it again," had been his hasty edict. And his lawyers had conscientiously set to work to carry out his wishes, and had let the Abbey for a term of fifteen years. Now the lease had expired, and Frayne was eagerly planning to return to England and take up his abode there once more. He had been looking forward to it intensely, almost counting the weeks until the time for departure thither should arrive, so that it had come upon him in the nature of a rather hard blow when Violet pleaded for a further delay before they "buried themselves in the country."

There were other reasons, too, which complicated the fulfilment of her wishes. Elizabeth was the chief of these reasons. Some arrangement must be made for her dur-

ing his own and Violet's absence. She was nineteen now, and could not be packed off into the care of a schoolmistress as formerly, nor could they very well leave her alone at Villa Ilario. Setting other circumstances aside, Lake Como, place of blue skies and sunshine in spring and summer, can be terribly bleak and bitter in the winter. And above and beyond all these practical considerations, there was his reluctance to being parted from Elizabeth, and his knowledge that her unwillingness in the matter would equal his own.

The year which had elapsed since she left school had served to bind father and daughter very closely together. She understood him as Violet, passionately though he worshipped her, never would. It was not Violet's *métier* to understand other people; she merely demanded from them. Her appeal was purely feminine, and she existed principally to charm and attract and, in return, to be shielded and spoiled and deferred to. But in Elizabeth Frayne found a humorous understanding and a certain almost boyish independence of spirit that made for comradeship between them. She was able to give him all that his wife could not, and he knew that, even though he and Violet would be tremendously happy alone together, he would miss Elizabeth badly.

So that he was very silent as he turned the boat round and began rowing shoreward, nor did Violet make any attempt to interrupt his train of thought. She knew quite well that her own way in the matter was already gained; it only remained for Candy to settle the actual ways and means by which it could be accomplished, and she had no doubt of his ability to do this.

Elizabeth might not like it; that she realised. But then, she reflected, the whole of her own and Candy's

life could not be run exclusively for Elizabeth's gratification. Indeed, she thought that latterly consideration for Elizabeth had been rather too much to the fore. The year they had spent at Villa Ilario, broken only by two or three months on the Riviera during the coldest part of the winter—and even then she had accompanied them—had been entirely for Elizabeth's edification, in order that, as Candy expressed it, she might have a glimpse of home life after so many years spent at boarding-school.

Violet herself had found the glimpse of home life excessively tedious. Since her marriage she had become used to a roaming existence, to the stimulating contrasts afforded by a smart season in Paris or some French seaside resort, and by weeks of camp-life in less civilised regions, and the even tenor of events at Frayne's villa near the little lakeside village of Cernobbio bored her almost to tears. The beauty of the lake, beauty over which she had raved when, in the past, she and Candy had been wont to pay brief visits to Villa Ilario alone together, had lost its charm for her. Her eyes rested upon it quite indifferently as the boat slipped shoreward. Facing her was the villa itself, pink-stuccoed, with gay green shutters flung back on either side the windows. In front ran a paved veranda, coolly shadowed on the hottest day, the pillars supporting its roof so clothed with rose and jasmine that they looked like columns of scented blossom. From the veranda a broad path, flanked by flower-gemmed lawns, led to a terrace which overlooked the lake, and from thence a short flight of stone steps dropped down to the level of the water's edge.

The boat's side grated against the steps. Frayne made her fast to an iron ring, then helped Violet out, and together they took their way into the house. As they

entered the cool, marble-floored hall, she caught sight of a slim, white-clad figure, racket in hand, emerging into it from another entrance—the entrance that gave upon the garden proper behind the house.

"There's Elizabeth. Have your little talk with her now," she said. Violet believed in striking while the iron was hot. "I'll go upstairs and rest for half an hour before dressing. It's been terribly hot to-day, and I'm rather tired."

"Not overdone it, have you?" asked Frayne quickly.

She shook her head, smiling up at him with that wistful sweetness of hers which always went straight to a man's heart.

"Oh, no. I'm only just a bit tired, that's all. You have a cocktail while I rest. Elizabeth will make you one."

Frayne glanced whimsically down at his daughter as the latter crossed the hall and joined them.

"What do you say, Elizabeth?"

"I say you're a very spoilt person," she replied, tucking her arm into his. "Come along."

CHAPTER II

A COMMITTEE OF TWO

"IS it all right?" inquired Elizabeth, as Frayne sipped the cocktail she had mixed for him.

"A trifle potent, perhaps," he answered, smiling. "But I shan't quarrel with you over that." Then, the smile fading, he relapsed into silence and sat restlessly fingering the stem of his wine-glass, while Elizabeth watched him with meditative eyes.

They had established themselves in a couple of chairs on the veranda, facing the lake, and the sunlight, slanting in upon them between the flower-wreathed pillars, revealed both the likenesses and unlikenesses betwixt father and daughter. Both faces were of the thin, eager, rather sharply-angled type, although in Elizabeth's case youth had softened the angled lines into something more rounded, and Frayne's smoke-black, waveless hair, just touched with grey, was repeated on her sleek little head, but minus those grey fingerprints of time, while the curving girlish mouth was fashioned on the same sensitive lines as her father's. But here the resemblance ended. Candy's skin was tanned as brown as a nut, while Elizabeth's, notwithstanding exposure to the Italian sun, remained of a warm ivory pallor. Hers was an arresting young head with its vidid colour contrast of dark hair, white skin, and scarlet lips, and most arresting of all were the eyes beneath the straight black brows, eyes that were definitely grey, without a hint of blue in them, set

rather wide apart between a double row of short black lashes. They were no inheritance from her father, and sometimes a fleeting expression in them would bring back forcibly to Frayne's mind the remembrance of that other woman whose eyes they so startingly recalled—Irene, the woman who had once been his wife and who was Elizabeth's mother.

For Irene he had experienced most of the emotions a woman can call forth from a man, beginning with blind, passionate worship, through stages of suspicion and fierce jealousy, to that ultimate bitter unforgivingness which follows the betrayal of faith and love. The brief, unhappy tale of their married life might have been almost predestined of the gods. Irene was only seventeen when Frayne married her—ardent, beautiful beyond the average, and proportionately spoilt, and more than one of their mutual acquaintances had prophesied that when he carried her off to Frayne Abbey, to live in the depths of the country, it would spell disaster.

At first, the evil prophets had been confounded. Frayne and Irene were riotously happy together, and when, at the end of a year, Elizabeth arrived, it seemed as though their cup of happiness was brimming over. But that ecstatic period lasted only a very brief time. Irene was no mother-woman. She could be by turns devoted wife, adorable mistress, and good comrade to the one man in her life, but a divided allegiance left her stranded. Elizabeth, after a few months, meant little more to her than a rather tiresome duty and encumbrance, an obstacle to her free and irresponsible enjoyment of life, while she found Frayne's absorbed devotion to his small daughter utterly incomprehensible. Moreover, it

robbed her of her own prescriptive right to his exclusive attention.

Inevitably, husband and wife began to drift apart. Manlike, he had expected her to "settle down" when the child came, instead of which, released at last from the enforced quiet of the preceding months of waiting, Irene went straight out in a demand for all the amusement and fun that life could offer. And, to a half-child, half-woman of her temperament, the monotony of life at Frayne Abbey offered very little. Waincliff, near which the Abbey was situated, was only a tiny fishing village, and, since Irene was no sportswoman, the diversions offered by the country-side around meant nothing to her. Born and brought up in London, she was for ever craving the gaiety which only a big city can provide. Time hung heavily on her hands, and before long, though hardly consciously aware of it, she was filled with a smouldering, rebellious sense of being thwarted, of youth drearily wasted.

Candover, fully occupied with his own pursuits of shooting and hunting and the management of the estate, and charmed by the advent of Elizabeth, never saw, never realised her boredom. But someone else did. There is always a "someone else" who sees these things and who is fatally ready to step into the breach and counteract them. In this case the someone else materialised in the shape of Terence O'Neill, a gay, warm-hearted young Irishman who had come down to the district to hunt—and stayed to make love. Both young, both ardent, in love with life and laughter, it was almost inevitable that he and Irene should gravitate together. In the circumstances, the result was practically a foregone conclusion. Candover came home late one evening from

a long day's hunting to find that his wife had gone away with O'Neill, leaving only an incoherent little letter of explanation behind her, written in the scrawling, childish, unformed hand which, in the good days that were long past, had been the source of many a small joke between them.

Frayne's world had crashed about his ears, and all that remained was to pack the débris out of sight as decently as might be. The divorce went through quite unobtrusively, leaving Irene free to find happiness with her Irishman—a short-lived happiness enough, since O'Neill broke his neck a year after they were married, riding hell-for-leather in a steeplechase, and four years later Irene herself, broken-hearted and terribly alone, faded quietly out of existence.

Meanwhile, Frayne had proceeded to let the Abbey for a term of fifteen years. He was convinced that life held nothing for him in the future and that the sight of the place where he had once found happiness would be forever abhorrent. All that remained to him out of the wreckage was Elizabeth, and the child became the pivot of his existence. Accompanied by the old nurse who had looked after her ever since she was born, she wandered all over Europe with her father, and in those years of wandering was laid the foundation of the good comradeship which bound them together now that Elizabeth had grown up.

But few lives are altogether destroyed by a single thrust of Fate's dagger. Time, with slow and patient fingers, works his constant miracle of healing, drawing the torn edges of the wound together until sometimes even the scar is hardly noticeable. So it was with Frayne. The shock of Irene's faithlessness had killed his love

for her—destroyed it ruthlessly. She was no longer the woman he believed her to be—the woman he had loved. He never forgave her—could never see himself as even partially to blame for the unhappy march of events, and at last there came a time when he was able to face the world anew, when the suffering and anger of the past had become no more than a dulled and bitter memory.

It was then that Violet had come into his life, and once again the world was transformed. She loved him as much as it was in her make-up to love any man, and all the ardour and devotion of Frayne's nature, checked and stultified by the tragic ending of his first marriage, woke anew. The succeeding years, while Elizabeth was at school, only spending occasional holidays with them, spelt a chapter of romantic wanderings, and now that the time had arrived when she must perforce be included in the equation of their lives, Violet was rebelling against the new order of things.

Frayne, fiddling irritably with his cocktail glass, wondered how on earth he was to broach the matter to his daughter. Navigating the Straits of Messina, with Scylla on the one side and Charybdis on the other, seemed to him a comparatively easy proposition contrasted with the course he had to steer betwixt the two women who loved him, and whom he loved, each in a different way. It was the latter fact which complicated matters. He was loath to hurt or disappoint either of them. And then, just when he was cudgelling his brains as to the best method of introducing the difficult topic, Elizabeth's voice, with a faint, underlying humour in its tone, broke in upon his thoughts.

"What's the trouble, Candy?"

Frayne flashed a glance at her, half deprecating, half whimsical.

"Why should you think there's any—trouble?" he demanded.

"Because you're simply staring at your cocktail instead of drinking it—sure sign of masculine preoccupation."

He laughed.

"O wise young woman! Well, it's like this—h'm——" He hesitated, then started again. "The fact is, you see ——" Once more he halted, and his eyes sought hers with a kind of humorous supplication in them.

"I'm afraid I don't see—yet," said Elizabeth patiently.

Frayne pulled out his case and proceeded to light a cigarette. Then he blew a thin stream of smoke into the air.

"Oh, well," he said at last. "It's no use beating about the bush. The truth is, Violet's getting fed up with Lake Como. The wander-fever's bitten her again."

Elizabeth's level brows lifted quizzically.

"At rather an awkward moment, isn't it?" she submitted. "I thought we were all going back to England, to settle down at Waincliff."

He nodded.

"That's just it. Violet doesn't seem exactly enthralled by the prospect. Actually, when we get there, I expect she'll like it much better than she thinks she will. She can hunt and fish, and there's quite good boating and bathing to be had in the summer. All the same, as she's keen on roaming about a bit more first—why, I'd rather she did what she wanted."

"You'll miss the hunting," flashed out Elizabeth quickly.

A faint shade crossed his face.

"Oh, perhaps not the whole season," he suggested. "By Christmas she may feel like giving the Abbey a trial. The only thing is——" He paused. It was abominably difficult to put it into words—to tell this best of chums that she wasn't wanted.

"'M?" came encouragingly from Elizabeth.

"Well," said Frayne slowly. "The thing is, what would *you* like to do while we're travelling?"

It was out at last. Elizabeth took it like a thoroughbred. The swift glance he stole at her face revealed no change in its expression. Only a faint pink flush showed itself for a moment beneath the clear pallor of her skin.

"What would you like me to do, Candy?" she said gently. "Haven't you got some plan you could suggest?"

He laid his hand quickly over hers.

"Good kid!" he said gratefully. "You do understand, don't you?"

"Of course I do. You transparent old humbug," she went on, smiling, "tell me what the plan is. I'm quite sure you've got it all cut and dried, really—only you were afraid to say so."

"I was, rather," he admitted apologetically. "It—it seemed so beastly, somehow."

"Not in the least. It's perfectly natural. If I were Violet I'm sure I shouldn't want a stepdaughter always tagging round after me. Not even such a nice one as I am—and I do think I'm really rather a stepdaughter *de luxe!* It needs tact—to be a stepdaughter," she added with a little grin.

Frayne laughed outright.

"I'm certain it does," he agreed. "In fact, it needs tact to be a relation at all. But to get back—my idea was that you might like to go to England, to Waincliff

itself, and wait for us there. You've never had more than a glimpse of the old country—and only just a few days in London at that. What do you say?"

Elizabeth regarded him contemplatively.

"I shall feel rather like a very small nut in a very large shell, alone at the Abbey, shan't I?"

"God bless my soul! I never dreamed of planting you down in the Abbey. Nothing of the kind. Mrs. Dove, my old housekeeper, has been in charge there since the tenants evacuated. She'll look after everything until we come—and then she can look after us. I know Violet will never want to be bothered with the management of a big staff of servants! No, my idea was that you should stay with some people in the neighbourhood."

"What people?"

"You've heard me speak of Jane Wentworth? She was"—he hesitated, then went rapidly—"she was a great friend of your mother's. And, oddly enough, a friend of mine, too, though we disagreed rather badly over—over certain things." Elizabeth nodded. She knew all the circumstances of her father's first marriage. He had never believed in keeping them from her, and, as soon as she was old enough to understand, she had been told the bare facts—to Frayne's credit be it said, with extraordinarily little bias. In a way, he had left her free to form her own opinion on the matter, to judge between her parents for herself. "Still," he resumed, "in spite of that, Jane and I have always remained friends, and we've kept in touch ever since I quitted the Abbey. Whenever I run over to London, if she happens to be in town at the moment, she and I lunch or dine together. And on the last occasion she said that, now you had left school, she would so much like to meet you.

In fact, she wanted you to go and stay with her at Waincliff. But I'm afraid I told her that I couldn't spare you. I couldn't, you know"—smiling a little. "You'd only just come home, then, for 'keeps.' "

"Of course not. I shouldn't have wanted to go, either," assented Elizabeth fervently.

Frayne fell silent for a few moments, his thoughts dwelling on that last meeting with Jane Wentworth. He remembered it so well. They had lunched together at a little Italian restaurant in Soho—the kind of place, as Jane was wont to say, "where one can *talk*—without a band blaring the latest fox-trot in your ears and scattering all your thoughts to the four winds of heaven." And they *had* talked—talked far back into the past, into the old unhappy days when Jane had stood loyally by her friend throughout the dreadful months of waiting for the divorce to be made absolute, and on through the brief year's married happiness that followed to those last four lonely, arid years of Irene's short and tragic life.

"You asked too much and gave too little, Candy," Jane had told him frankly. "And you didn't allow for temperament."

" 'Temperament'?" came Frayne's edged reply. "Temperament's merely a present-day shibboleth used as an excuse for failure."

Jane shook her head.

"No, you're wrong. Temperament's bedrock—the one real thing which *does* excuse failure—and which accounts for success, too, my dear," she said quietly.

"I'm afraid I can't find any excuse for Irene," returned Frayne. "Not even in her temperament."

"You're very hard—to some people."

"Most of us are hard—to the person who's messed up our lives for us."

"Only, actually, Irene didn't mess up your life," retorted Jane shrewdly. "Though, of course, at the time you couldn't know that. You thought she had. . . . Instead, you've got Elizabeth—and you've found love again. Some of us can't do that, Candy—and we haven't even got an Elizabeth."

He knew to what she referred—to the tragedy which had darkened her own life. The man whom she was to have married lay buried beneath the soil of France, killed only a week before the day fixed for their wedding. That had happened eight years ago, and a certain look which had come into Jane's eyes when the telegram was put into her hand had never left them since. When they laughed—and they were eyes that laughed quite often—Frayne always knew they were laughing *over* that look, as the ripples may break on the surface of a deep pool. The deep stillness is there all the time, underneath.

"I wish you had an Elizabeth—of your own," he said impulsively.

For a moment Jane's face had whitened. It was the very pith and marrow of her hurt that she had nothing—nothing to hold on by—only dreams of what might have been. Some women had children. . . . She squared her shoulders.

"I wish I had," she said quietly. "But as I haven't, won't you lend me *your* Elizabeth for a time? Let her come and stay with me, Candy."

Boyishly jubilant over Elizabeth's final release from school, Frayne had felt that he couldn't possibly do without her just at the time, but now the rather wistfully ut-

tered invitation of a year ago seemed expressly designed to meet the need of the moment.

"Jane hasn't seen you since you were a small thing of four," he remarked, scanning his daughter with speculative eyes. "Fifteen years. Lord, it's a devil of a long time! I wonder what she'll think of you?"

"You've quite decided that I'm going to Jane, then?" returned Elizabeth, with some amusement.

"My dear! Not if you don't want to!" he exclaimed hastily. "In that case, we'll think of something else, of course."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"You needn't. I think I should like to go to your Jane."

He heaved a sigh of relief.

"Then that's settled——" he began.

"Not quite," she broke in laughingly. "I'm perfectly willing to go and stay with Jane, but you must find out first whether she still wants to have me or not. After all, my most unpractical parent, it's a year since she invited me, and you can't exactly accept an invitation off-hand after an interval of that length! Besides, if you and Violet are going to be away for some months, I can't very well dump myself on Jane for the whole time, can I?"

"Yes, you can. That was her idea—that we should probably be travelling about as usual, after you'd left school, and that you might spend a few months with her at Brownleaves—that's her home, hers and Colin's. You knew she had a brother, Colin, didn't you? Got badly knocked about in the war, poor chap. He's lame, and a trifle difficult at times, in consequence, I believe, but you won't mind that?"

"No, I shan't mind that," she answered. Adding impertinently: "You're a trifle difficult at times, you know —and without the excuse of being lame, either!"

Frayne beamed at her.

"Anyway, difficult people are rarely dull," he countered triumphantly. "They're stimulating—like salted almonds." He glanced at his watch. "By Jove, it's time we were dressing for dinner! Come along, kiddy." He rose and, pulling her to her feet beside him, stood looking down at her searchingly a moment. "So I'm to write to Jane, am I? That settled?"

She nodded affirmatively.

"Quite settled."

He squeezed her hands.

"You're a good little sport, Elizabeth," he said. That was all, but she knew that in his own way he was thanking her for having understood.

CHAPTER III

ON THE LAKE

FRAYNE'S letter to Jane Wentworth brought a reply by return of post—two replies, in fact, one addressed to Frayne himself and the other to Elizabeth.

"Jane writes that she will be delighted to have you," he announced at breakfast a few mornings later.

"I know," returned Elizabeth, looking up from her own correspondence. "She's written to me, too."

"Oh!" Candy's eyes narrowed in their usual characteristic fashion when anything gave him food for reflection. But he did not ask to see the letter. With that odd kind of "wireless" which existed betwixt him and his daughter he divined that she did not wish him to see it.

"Does she sound nice?" asked Violet, a trifle anxiously. It was eminently desirable, from her own point of view, that her stepdaughter should be happily settled for the next few months. Otherwise Candy would be certain to worry and then their whole projected trip would be spoilt. "Do you think you'll like her?"

"I'm sure I shall," replied Elizabeth composedly.

She did not vouchsafe why she felt so sure. It was something intimate to herself which ran between the lines of Jane's letter—that same big-heartedness which had stood loyally by the mother offering itself now to the daughter.

"I can't tell you how delighted I am that you are coming to me," wrote Jane. "I've always felt that you and I

ought to 'belong' in a rather special kind of way, because you were Irene's child. And I'm so glad that at last Candy is going to let me have my share in you!"

* * * * *

Often, during the few days that remained before the date fixed for her departure to England, the recollection of Jane's letter recurred to Elizabeth's mind, bringing with it a pleasant little glow of eagerness to meet the writer, and softening, in some unaccountable way, the sharp edges of the impending parting with her beloved Candy. She hardly felt as though she would be going amongst absolute strangers. The welcome in Jane's warm heart seemed to have come half across Europe to meet her, and just now she was feeling rather in need of a welcome from somebody.

Not for worlds would she have admitted it, but she was conscious of a certain soreness of heart at being left behind, or rather, shunted off to Waincliff in order that Candy and Violet might ramble about Europe. There had been a time when she herself had been Candy's chosen fellow-traveller on similar wanderings, and in those days her childish companionship had sufficed and comforted him curiously. It was rather wonderful, the relationship that bound these two together. The kinship between them was of spirit and understanding rather than of mere consanguinity, their attitude to each other less that of father and daughter than that of two good comrades, one older than the other.

So it was small wonder that, pluckily though she might strive against it, Elizabeth was conscious now of a smothered feeling of being set aside. She knew that it was inevitable, that Violet had right on her side in exercising her first claim upon her husband, and in spite of her own

soreness of heart she was unfeignedly glad of Candy's happiness. He had been very unhappy once, poor darling. Child as she was then, in those years which followed his leaving Frayne Abbey, she had been none the less instinctively aware of a sense of tragedy and loss—of something beyond her comprehension that had shadowed his life. And she was glad now in his recovered happiness.

Still, the fact remained, that the demands Violet made upon her husband were bound to react on Elizabeth. For instance, to-day—her last day at Villa Ilario—Violet had taken him off for a motor run from which they were unlikely to return until late in the afternoon. He hadn't wanted to go in the very least—in the circumstances he would have greatly preferred to spend as much time as possible with Elizabeth—but Violet had resorted to her usual tactics of plaintive appeal and he had given in accordingly.

Sometimes it seemed to Elizabeth as though her stepmother deliberately planned on occasion to prevent her and Candy from being too much together. Violet might at least, she reflected, have refrained from carrying him off on this, her very last day of all, and at odd moments, as she packed her trunks in preparation for departure, a wave of loneliness swept over her. It was at these moments that the thought of Jane's cheery letter created a comforting little sense of warmth in her heart, and she applied herself to her packing with renewed vigour.

By three o'clock in the afternoon it was all finished, except for the few odds and ends which always remain to be put in at the last moment, and she strolled out on to the terrace to take a final peep at the lake. It was looking very beautiful—curiously, deeply green from

the reflections cast on its surface by the verdure-clad hills around it. An odd kind of stillness prevailed. It was almost, she told herself, as though the lake had gone to sleep, so quiet and almost rippleless it lay.

Below, moored at the foot of the steps, lay the *Carlotta,* the villa boat, brushing very gently against the stonework. Elizabeth glanced down at its painted sides affectionately. How many good hours she had spent in it, either alone or with Candy—and how long would it not be before she saw either the *Carlotta,* or the villa, or Lake Como again!

The thought was like an importunate little tug at her heart, a wistful reminder that this was her very last afternoon on the shores of her beloved lake. She turned impulsively to descend the steps. She would take the boat out for a final pull—just scull round the bend of the bay and up the lake a little way to where she could glimpse the mountains folding one behind the other towards Bellagio.

A few minutes sufficed to put her plan into action, and presently she was rowing leisurely out across the tranquil water. She pulled round the arm of the bay, heading the boat for the middle of the lake, and, having achieved this point of vantage, she allowed the sculls to trail idly from the rowlocks while she established herself on a cushion in the bottom of the boat, banking the remaining cushions in the stern seat comfortably against her back. Then, lighting a cigarette, she surrendered herself idly to thoughts of the future.

It was rather taking a plunge into the unknown, this projected journey of hers to England. As Candy had said, her own country was practically unknown territory to her. She had been barely four years of age when

circumstances had driven him into exile, and since then, with the exception of a few days spent in London, she had lived entirely on the Continent. Her recollections of England, therefore, embodied only a brief interval of days crowded with sight-seeing and amusements, passed against the background of a big, luxurious hotel. Of English country life she was completely ignorant, and mingled with the little ache in her heart at the idea of leaving Villa Ilario, she was becoming conscious of a certain eagerness of anticipation to see her own country and the actual home where she had been born.

Yet, in spite of this growing sense of anticipation, she shrank from the break it would mean in her life—from the newness and strangeness of it all. With the exception of the school terms—grown by habit into accepted interruptions—she had never been apart from Candy, and she had an odd, uncomfortable feeling that this separation was in some curious way the beginning of a fresh epoch in her life, of some sharp severance of the old from the new, so that never again would she and Candy meet with the old complete understanding of each other, never come close together quite in the same way as they had been in the past. It was almost as though some vague premonition of the future had laid a light, warning touch on her consciousness. . . .

A chill little flurry of water sprayed suddenly across the back of her hand, rousing her from her train of thought to an abrupt realisation that the boat was rocking rather unsteadily. She glanced round her, and what she saw filled her with a quick sense of dismay. The whole aspect of things had changed. From behind the mountains banks of leaden cloud were creeping up, blotting out the blueness of the sky so rapidly that in a few

moments it would be a canopy of billowing grey, splotched with thunderous black, while sudden gusts of wind came and went, flicking the surface of the water into eddies and ripples.

Elizabeth knew that unexpected squalls sometimes blew up out of quite a clear sky and swept down between the mountains—dangerous squalls, converting the placid lake into a sea of battling waves, in which no small craft could live, and she felt anxious lest this sudden grey gustiness should prove the forerunner of a gale. Scrambling back into her seat as quickly as the rocking of the boat permitted, she seized the oars and began to pull shoreward.

But it was much harder work now than it had been when first she came out. With each moment the turbulence of the water increased, while the wind seemed to be blowing up from every direction at once, lashing it into choppy waves that flung themselves angrily against each other.

She threw a hasty glance over her shoulder towards the shore. It looked a long way off, and her hard sculling of the last few moments didn't seem to have brought her appreciably nearer to it. The sky was heavy now with menacingly dark clouds, and the surface of the lake tufted with angry foam. The *Carlotta* was a narrow, lightly-built boat, not constructed to withstand a rough sea, and Elizabeth was conscious of a stab of fear as her eyes scanned the threatening looking waters, bare of any craft except her own.

Her mind worked swiftly. Now that it was too late she realised that, with her experience of the lake, she ought to have taken warning from that curious oily stillness which had prevailed when she set out. Other peo-

ple evidently had done, and had remained safely on land. For an instant a feeling of panic overcame her as she surveyed the expanse of grey tossing water which intervened betwixt the *Carlotta* and the shore. Then, determined not to lose her nerve, she steadied herself by a sheer effort of will and bent once more to her oars.

In less than five minutes, so swiftly had the gale gathered in force, she recognised the futility of her efforts. It was almost impossible to keep the boat head on to the waves. The gusty wind turned her hither and thither, and every few minutes slapped a shower of water over her side.

There was actual danger now! The realisation of it came with a sudden terrifying shock, and Elizabeth felt her heart give a queer leap. Danger of drowning—of death! And she had only come out, as she had done so many times before, for a row on the sunlit lake . . . the familiar green-clad shores, dotted with villas, encircled her . . . quarter of an hour ago she had been idly smoking and day-dreaming amidst the gaily-striped boat cushions. . . . And now—death. Sinking down, down into the awful, unknown depths of the lake. It was almost laughable—the absurd impossibility of the idea. And yet it had suddenly become not only possible, but terribly, horribly imminent. At racing speed these thoughts flashed through her mind. She struggled on desperately, pulling with aching arms while the boat staggered and lurched as the waves pitched against it. By this time there was water round her feet, a shallow pool slopping about in the bottom of the boat, clammily cold. A wave broke over the bows and a fresh runnel of water poured down, deepening the pool. With set teeth Elizabeth fought on. She had no hope

now, the boat must fill long before she could get to shore, but still she stuck doggedly to the oars. She felt dazed, almost as though she were in a dream—a horrible nightmare.

And then, all at once, through the rushing noise of wind and water she became conscious of another sound —the sound of a human voice. Someone was shouting —shouting to her across the hurly-burly. Still clutching the oars, she turned her head and over her shoulder discerned a motor-boat churning its way towards her, a man at the steering wheel.

"Hold on! Hold on!"

She could not catch the words, but she saw him wave his arm and heard his voice ringing across to her. Her glance measured the distance between her boat and his. The latter was leaping and rolling through the chopping waves, straining to reach her. Would he get to her in time? Could she possibly keep the *Carlotta* afloat until he came? The waves seemed as though they were trying to drag the sculls out of her grasp. She clung to them desperately, battling still to keep the boat from drifting broadside on. A few moments more and she would be in safety. The motor-boat was drawing nearer, plunging towards her. But she was getting tired. Her arms seemed numb—numb with the strain, her hands cramped and helpless. Her heart sank. Safety so near —and yet she felt she could never hold out until it came.

"You're all right! Don't lose your head! Hold *on!*"

Once more the voice came ringing over the water. This time the words reached her—encouraging, commanding, whipping her to fresh effort.

She held on, suddenly sure that the man who was coming to her help would not fail her.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN IN THE MOTOR-BOAT

ELIZABETH drew a long breath of relief, then the motor-boat pitched violently and she sat down abruptly on its broad seat. Quite how it had all been accomplished she couldn't say. She remembered the beat of the engine suddenly loud in her ears, a shout of "Ship your oars—quick!" then the grating of boat's side against boat's side as the waves flung them together, and the next moment she was aware of someone stooping towards her, of strong hands beneath her armpits, and a sharp, imperative command, "Catch hold—round my neck!" Instinctively she had obeyed. Followed a dreadful instant when both boats had rocked madly in the welter of billowing waters and Elizabeth visioned them going straight to the bottom, the next, she felt herself swung clear of the *Carlotta* and into the motor-boat alongside.

It had been quick work—and only just quick enough. The same wind-driven surge which had set the motor-boat lurching till her gunwale almost dipped into the lake had swept clean across the little rowing-boat, swamping her utterly, and, even as Elizabeth was jerked helplessly down on to a seat, the *Carlotta* sank out of sight with a suddenness that was appalling.

"We timed that rather well," remarked a cool voice, with a touch of grim amusement in it.

Elizabeth looked across at the man who had come to

her rescue. He was a lean, brown person—brown hair, skin sunburnt brown as Candy's own, and out of the surrounding brownness, startlingly vivid by contrast, gleamed a pair of very keen, very blue eyes.

"You did, you mean," she said quickly.

He smiled. He had a curiously attractive smile that lightened his lean, dark face in a most unexpected fashion.

"Call it a mutual effort," he amended. "If you hadn't obeyed orders with quite unfeminine promptness, I couldn't possibly have picked you up."

"I was too frightened to do anything else," said Elizabeth. "I thought my last hour had come—and I'm not altogether sure it hasn't, even now," she added, as the little motor-boat, ploughing its way through the waves, rolled and lurched sickeningly.

"You can be, quite sure—unless the engine conks out," he returned briefly.

Her glance rested for a moment on the hands manipulating the wheel—muscular, sunburnt hands, which yet held a definite suggestion of sensitiveness in their long, supple fingers. Somehow those hands, with their implication of pliant strength, reassured her. If anyone could bring the little craft safely back to shore she felt that their owner would do it.

That it was no easy task she could guess from the man's intentness. Even when he had spoken to her she had felt that he was only giving her the merest fringe of his attention. His whole mind was concentrated on the matter in hand. She relapsed into silence, covertly watching his face and those keen blue eyes of his, as they gazed ahead, calculating how to meet and beat the violence of the leaping waves.

It was a face of contradictions, high cheek-boned, squarish as to jaw, with a somewhat ironic bitterness in the closing of the lips—a bitterness repudiated by the swift sweetness and gaiety of his smile. In repose, the face was grave, almost stern, as though some past discipline of suffering had hardened it prematurely, yet, in spite of this, it conveyed a suggestion of underlying resilience, of a certain dare-devil, mocking philosophy that would meet and defy the challenge of an ill fate.

Elizabeth was conscious of a fugitive feminine curiosity concerning the man who had come to her rescue. For a moment or two it even absorbed her thoughts to the exclusion of her own unpleasant predicament. Then the plop of a large raindrop on the end of her nose brought her speculations to an abrupt end. Another and another fell, forerunners of a heavy downpour. The man at the wheel spoke curtly.

"There'll be a deluge in another minute," he said, with a glance at the lowering sky. "Get down into the cabin and keep dry."

For an instant she hesitated. If anything went wrong, if—supposing the motor-boat were to be swamped as the *Carlotta* had been, she would very much rather remain where she was, wet or dry, than be cooped up in the cabin. As though he sensed the source of her hesitation the man's keen eyes swept her face amusedly.

"You needn't be afraid," he said dryly. "You're not going to drown this journey. Get in there, d'you hear?"

Without more ado, she obeyed. Nor was it a moment too soon. The rain was sheeting down in real earnest now, blown this way and that by the gusty wind. As she sat crouched in the litttle glass-windowed cabin, watching the man's stern-set face through the slanting

drive of the rain, she wondered what he would have done if she had disobeyed him. Somehow he did not look as though he would brook opposition very easily.

Through the window at the other end of the cabin she could see whither the boat was heading—straight towards the harbourage of a small, pink-stuccoed villa which faced the lake almost opposite to the spot where she had first found herself in difficulties with the *Carlotta*. No, there was no danger of drowning now. With every moment the plucky little motor-boat was beating its way nearer and nearer to land.

The villa garden, like most of those which bordered the shore, terminated in a steep stone wall against which the lake lapped softly on a summer's day, beat futilely when a gale whipped it into crested waves. A flight of steps, leading to the water's edge like those at Villa Ilario, broke its surface in the centre, and to the right a low stone archway gave ingress to a large boat-house, built of stone. It was towards this arch that the motor-boat was headed. It would be ticklish work getting through, Elizabeth could see. The current ran swiftly down past the arch, and the choppy waves added to the difficulty. But the man at the wheel seemed quite unperturbed. She watched him with steady hands set the boat's nose for a point a little higher up than the actual archway itself, then let her drop downward with the current, and, finally, with a swift turn at precisely the psychological moment, send her shooting in between the broad, squat pillars of the arch.

As the calm of the little stone-built harbourage succeeded the fury of the waves outside, Elizabeth felt the tension of her nerves relax. It all seemed so reassuringly familiar and normal after the horror of those few terrible

moments when she had been within an ace of death. A couple of light rowing-boats, similar in type to the *Carlotta,* lay moored against the landing-stage, rising and falling quite gently to the curbed motion of the water, and from the landing-place itself to the villa garden above there climbed a broad stone stairway.

The man who had brought her into safety busied himself tying up the motor-boat. Then he sprang out on to the landing-stage and held out his hand.

"Come," he said briefly, his keen glance traversing her face, a little pinched and pale as the result of her adventure. "The sooner you have a hot drink the better."

She let him help her out of the boat, and when, instead of releasing her, he put his hand under her arm as they mounted the steps, she found, to her surprise, that she was quite glad of his support. Her legs felt curiously wobbly, as though they would give way beneath her with very little provocation.

"Now," he said, when they had reached the top and, emerging from the shelter of the boat-house roof, were greeted by a rush of driving rain, "we must make a dash for it. Come on."

She hung back, still aware of that ridiculous shakiness in her lower limbs. But he entirely disregarded her glance of mute appeal. Catching her by the hand, he set off towards the house, his long legs covering the ground at an easy loping run, and, willy-nilly, she found herself racing along beside him. She was almost breathless by the time they reached the house, but the weakness of which she had been conscious had completely gone. The blood was coursing through her veins, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright, and when he laughed down at her she found herself laughing back exactly as

if nothing untoward had happened, as though no menace of a swift and terrible death had been averted by the merest hair'sbreadth.

"That's better," he said approvingly. Then, as they entered the house, he sent his voice ringing through the hall: "Marietta! Marietta!" In response an elderly Italian woman came bustling out from the servants' quarters. She stared at them both in astonishment.

"Yes, we're half drowned, Marietta," said the man gaily, in answer to the alarmed interrogation on her wrinkled old face. "But only half. So light up the fire in the Oak Room, and then bring some whisky and lemons and boiling water. It would be rather ignominious to have a commonplace cold in the head," he added, turning to Elizabeth, "after triumphantly escaping a watery grave. Let me take off that wet coat of yours and Marietta shall dry it." As he spoke he proceeded to divest her of the knitted sports coat she was wearing.

"She understands English very well," observed Elizabeth.

"Oh, perfectly. She's lived with English friends of mine for the last twenty years. This is their villa—'Villa Felice.' They've lent it to me for a month while they're away."

He led the way into a quaint, oak-panelled room, octagonal in shape, with windows looking out upon the lake. On an open English hearth crackled and spluttered the fire which Marietta had just lit.

"That's a fad of my friends," he explained, noticing her quick glance of surprise. "That English fire-place—they had it specially put in."

"A very nice fad," she commented. "I wish we had

one in our villa. It's often quite cold enough for a fire in this part of the world."

"You live by the lake, then?" he asked quickly.

She nodded, holding out her feet to the cheery blaze.

"Yes, not very far from Cernobbio."

The warmth of the fire drew a faint steam from her soaked shoes and stockings, and the man's sharp glance, which seemed to miss nothing, noted it at once.

"Take those off," he ordered, "and I'll tell Marietta to have them dried. Wait a moment." He disappeared, returning in a very short space of time carrying a bath towel.

Elizabeth laughed outright.

"Good gracious! What's that for?"

"To dry your feet with, of course," he replied composedly. "Got those shoes off yet? No, you haven't. Well, get them off at once."

Rather surprised at her own meekness, she proceeded to obey. Then she held out her hand for the towel. But he shook his head.

"No, I'll give them a rub for you. You want to rub them hard—make them tingle, you know." He knelt on one knee beside her and lifted her slender feet in his hand. "I thought as much. They're stone cold."

Involuntarily she half drew away from his touch.

"I can rub them myself," she said, speaking with nervous haste.

His blue eyes flashed whimsically over her face.

"You needn't feel shy about it," he said, a teasing note in his voice.

"I'm not!" she declared, flushing indignantly.

"Oh, yes, you were," he retorted. "But you need not be. I'm used to bare feet. They don't shock my sensi-

bilities in the least," he continued, rubbing vigorously. "All that concerns me is whether they're a good or bad shape."

Despite herself, Elizabeth gave a little chuckle.

"I suppose you prefer them with the skin on, don't you?" she said pointedly.

He desisted from his energetic frictioning and regarded her with a rather rueful countenance.

"Was I rubbing too hard? I'm sorry. There, I think they'll do now. Toast them at the fire a bit while I make you a hot drink."

Old Marietta had already brought the necessary ingredients and he forthwith proceeded to mix a fairly strong glass of whisky and hot water, adding a squeeze of lemon juice and a counterbalancing lump of sugar.

"Drink that up," he said, handing it to Elizabeth, and then, having mixed a similar drink for himself, he sat down on the opposite side of the hearth.

She sipped the mixture gingerly, then made a wry face.

"What a horrible concoction!" she said. "Have I really got to swallow—all this?" with a dismayed glance at the tall glass she was holding.

He nodded, a gleam of laughter in his eyes.

"Every drop. And then, if you're good, I'll give you a cigarette."

"How do you know that I smoke?" she asked, smiling.

"You were smoking in your boat—before it went down," he returned.

She threw a glance towards the lake. Its waters were still rough, but the first fury of the storm had obviously abated.

"You couldn't possibly have seen that from the shore,"

she said. Adding: "Unless you were using field-glasses?"

"That's precisely what I was doing," he replied composedly. "When I saw a fair-weather rowing-boat like yours on the lake at a time when there was every indication of this squall coming, I picked up the field-glasses to find out whether it was a man or woman so cheerfully courting disaster."

"And then?" prompted Elizabeth, as he paused.

"Why, then, seeing that the storm was just beginning, I went off to the boat-house and got the motor-boat out, knowing it would be wanted."

"It was, indeed," she returned fervently. Adding, a little shyly: "I've never thanked you yet for really saving my life."

An odd expression crossed his face.

"Don't bother to," he said. "One never knows till years afterwards if having your life saved is a subject for gratitude or not. It depends upon whether life proves worth living."

"Don't you think it is?" she asked quickly. The question escaped her involuntarily, impelled by that odd, underlying bitterness which she had sensed in him. She caught it back, flushing sensitively. "I'm sorry," she said hastily. "I'd no business to ask that."

His smile was slightly quizzical.

"I don't mind answering," he replied. "There was a time when I—didn't—find life worth living."

"And now?"

"Now—in a way—decidedly, yes. After all, you can win through anything if you want to, and come out on the other side—though perhaps with an oddly enlightened opinion as to the due rewards of virtue and vice."

"You talk as if you'd got rather an inky past," said Elizabeth, trying to speak lightly and deflect the sudden note of cynicism which had sounded in his voice.

"That depends on what people call inky," he returned shortly.

She shook her head.

"Oh, no, it doesn't. Other people don't matter. It depends on whether you yourself think you've done anything you're ashamed of. Have you?" she demanded laughingly.

The man opposite met her eyes.

"No," he said simply. Adding: "But I can't agree with you that 'other people' don't count. They're the actual dispensers of heaven or hell." He spoke with a curious, flint-like hardness, as though the statement were the outcome of something that had been ground into him by force of circumstances. "When you've lived a little longer, you'll probably find that out for yourself. Though I hope you won't," he added suddenly, his voice softening.

Elizabeth was silent. She felt powerless to combat such an ingrained bitterness of outlook. Nor could she reconcile it with a certain buoyancy of spirit, a gay, whimsical charm of vitality which was an integral part of the man's make-up. It was as if, for a moment, he had opened the door of some dark chamber of remembrance which was ordinarily kept firmly locked and bolted. As though conscious of it himself, he rose and, crossing the room to the window, looked out over the lake.

"It's stopped raining," he said abruptly, "and the storm's over. I can run you home in the motor-boat as soon as you like."

Elizabeth could almost hear that hidden chamber door slam back into its place. Feeling all at once snubbed, she, too, rose and stood looking uncertainly towards him. He had seemed almost a friend, and now——

"It would be very good of you," she said, with nervous stiffness. "I—I'm sorry to give you all this trouble."

He turned round and immediately that quick, unexpected smile of his set her at her ease again. The friend had come back.

"It's no trouble at all," he replied. "As a matter of fact, since we weren't drowned, it's been quite a charming little adventure—at least, for me. What about your people?" he went on. "I'm afraid they'll be feeling rather anxious as to your whereabouts."

She shook her head.

"They won't even know I've been on the lake," she answered. "They're out motoring, and I expect"—with a little gurgling laugh—"the poor things will be thoroughly occupied with their own misfortunes. They're probably wet through."

He left her for a few minutes in order to retrieve her belongings from Marietta's care, and, as soon as she was ready to start, they made their way through the drenched garden to the boat-house. Every leaf and flower twinkled with a garnered raindrop and the air was fragrant with the smell of newly wet earth. Overhead, the sun was struggling through the thinning clouds, shedding a pale golden light athwart the lake, now almost as placid as though no storm had ever ruffled its tranquil surface.

It was the work of but a few minutes to unmoor the motor-boat and start up the engine, and soon Elizabeth found herself being borne rapidly towards Villa Ilario.

The man with her spoke very little on the homeward journey, and she reflected with a flash of rueful humour that, much as he might profess to have enjoyed the "charming adventure," he seemed quite content to bring it to a close as speedily as possible.

Arrived at the villa steps, he remained in the boat, steadying it with one hand while with the other he helped her out. She paused hesitatingly on the lowest step.

"Good-bye," she said. "And thank you so much for —for everything."

She held out her hand, but, instead of shaking it, he bent his head and carried it swiftly to his lips, then released it with a curious abruptness as though he would have recalled the action.

"On the contrary," he said lightly. "It's I who should thank you—for everything."

A minute later the motor-boat was throbbing its way back towards Villa Felice and Elizabeth was left standing alone at the foot of the steps. She mounted them slowly, her eyes following the track of the receding boat, and she had hardly reached the topmost step when Candy came running out from the house, followed in a more leisurely fashion by Violet. His face was very white and drawn-looking.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, as he caught sight of her. "I've been nearly out of my mind with anxiety. We found you'd taken the boat, and I knew she couldn't weather a squall like that. Whatever made you do such a thing?"

He spoke with that sharp irritability which is so often the outcome of sheer terror for the safety of someone beloved. Elizabeth understood.

"I'm terribly sorry, Candy dear," she said soothingly.

"I suppose I was a fool. I never anticipated a gale like that. But how is it you and Violet came back so early?"

"We came back because anyone with half an eye could see there was going to be a bad storm," he replied, still irately. It takes a minute or two to readjust oneself to normal when the strain of sharp anxiety has been suddenly removed, and Frayne had gone through some bad moments when he came back to find the *Carlotta* gone, a gale sweeping the lake, and no possible means of ascertaining whether Elizabeth were safe or not.

She tucked her arm into his.

"Well, anyhow, old dear, here I am safe and sound, thanks be to a young man who came to my rescue in a motor-boat—though I'm afraid the *Carlotta* is lying at the bottom of the lake," she added ruefully.

"Oh, damn the *Carlotta!*" Frayne dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "We can buy another *Carlotta.* But"—with a smile that asked pardon for his recent irritation—"we can't buy another Elizabeth, you know."

"Apparently we shan't need to, thanks to the owner of the motor-boat," interpolated Violet. "It sounds quite romantic. Tell us all about it."

So Elizabeth gave them a graphic description of her afternoon's adventure, only omitting one small detail of no particular importance.

"And what was the young man's name?" inquired Violet, when she had finished her story.

Elizabeth hesitated, and in her eyes an odd sort of surprise took birth. She had not realised, up to that moment, that the man who had rescued her had gone, as he had come, unknown.

"I haven't the faintest idea," she answered slowly. 'I never asked him."

CHAPTER V

WELCOME TO BROWNLEAVES

IT was over at last—the long, tiring journey from the shores of Lake Como into the heart of the English countryside, and now that she had so nearly reached her destination Elizabeth could look back with a certain humorous tolerance upon the inevitable tribulations by the way. She recalled it all—the dirty little Italian train which meandered its slow progress from Como to Milan, wherein "first class" was represented by a compartment upholstered in a deadly shade of red velvet, the tops of the cushions adorned by soiled-looking antimacassars in coarse lace, a compartment into which one climbed by means of two such ridiculously high steps that getting aboard the train constituted a veritable gymnastic feat. Then had followed the long run in a *wagon-lit* of the great Orient express, thundering its way betwixt the mountain gates of Switzerland, eternal snow on either hand, past Lac Léman, the azure blue of its waters such an amazing contrast to the tragic green depths of her own beloved Lake Como, and, after that, through France till the chill grey of early morning brought Paris and the usual scramble to secure a porter and get one's luggage passed by a Customs officer—one with clean hands and a pure and unsuspicious heart, if possible.

Elizabeth had broken her journey at Paris, staying the night with friends and leaving first thing the following day, and now late afternoon found her gazing eagerly

out of the window as her train sped on its way towards Waincliff. Fields of golden corn, dotted here and there with the glowing red of poppies, stretched away on either side the railway track, while beyond lay green pasture and woodland dimmed into distance by the haze of summer's heat.

Presently, with a warning shriek, the train dived into a tunnel, and when it emerged Elizabeth could see on her left the shining sea and a big promontory jutting out into it, hiding the village of Waincliff itself from view. Candy had described it all to her so often—described it with all the vivid tender touches of one who loves a place —that she recognised each feature of the landscape, as it came into sight, with a little thrilling sense of dear familiarity.

A minute later the train ran into the station and drew to a standstill, and, collecting her suit-case and the book with which she had been beguiling the journey, she descended on to the platform.

"Here you are at last!" exclaimed a cheery voice at her elbow. "As you're the only person to get out of the train, you simply must be Elizabeth."

She turned round quickly in response.

"Yes, I am," she said. "And, of course, you're——"

"Jane Wentworth," supplied the other promptly. She held out both hands. "Welcome to Waincliff, my dear." Then, impulsively, she bent forward and kissed her.

Somehow, Elizabeth did not feel in the least as if she were encountering a stranger. Jane was just the Jane Candy had so often pictured for her—not very tall, slight and rather boyish in figure notwithstanding her thirty-seven years, with cropped brown hair tucked away beneath a little pull-on hat, and a small, characteristic

face whose only claim to good looks lay in a pair of rather beautiful brown eyes, clear and intelligent like a nice dog's and with something of the same underlying pathos in them.

"I've got the car waiting for you outside," she said. "Don't expect a limousine, though"—with a twinkle. "Ours is only a humble two-seater—into which as often as not we squash three, if they're thin enough."

She summoned a porter, gave him instructions concerning Elizabeth's luggage, then led the way out to where the car was standing, and very soon they were slipping smoothly along the country road.

"It's Colin's car, actually," she pursued explanatorily. "Horses are more in my line than cars—I like something *alive* to deal with. He would have come to meet you himself, but that it's one of his bad days. I suppose you know he was very badly wounded in the war?" Then, as Elizabeth nodded: "It's left him lame, and on what I call one of his 'bad days' he simply can't stand the vibration of a car." Her face had shadowed over, and Elizabeth divined that Colin's lameness was a source of ever-present grief to his sister.

"Then I'm afraid he still suffers a good deal of pain?" she said gently, her quick sympathies responding to that shadowed look.

"At times. But it isn't only that. He's so cut-off from all he cared for. He loved horses as much as I do, loved everything that meant movement and action—hunting, tennis, dancing, everything like that—he was so splendidly strong, you see. Now it's all knocked off for the rest of his life—and he's barely thirty-five."

Elizabeth was silent. There seemed so little that one could say of comfort—words were so inadequate to

meet such a sweeping loss of all that had once made life worth while. Curiously enough, across her memory flashed the vision of another man—lithe and sinewy and splendidly strong, too, the brown-faced man who had come to her rescue on Lake Como. She could imagine so well what lameness would signify to him. He would be rather like an eagle with clipped wings, she thought. And just as he was, so had this unknown Colin once been.

The sound of Jane's voice brought her back to the present.

"But this is not a very cheerful way of welcoming you," she was saying apologetically, "to begin by telling you my worries. Do forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive," answered Elizabeth. "I do hope," she went on a trifle shyly, "that while I'm with you you *will* let me share any worries. I always share Candy's."

" 'Candy'?" Jane looked amused. "Do you call him that, too?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"Always," she said smilingly. "We're much too good pals for me to call him anything so distantly respectful as 'father'!"

At this moment the two-seater rounded a sharp corner and the whole sweep of the bay came suddenly into view. Jane braked the car to a standstill, while Elizabeth craned forward to see the place which was henceforth to become an integral part of her life. The village itself lay quaintly tucked into the curve of the bay—little more than a handful of fishermen's cottages climbing raggedly up the hill-side from the shore—a single cottage here, there a group of two or three clustered to-

gether, with weather-stained red roofs sprinkled with the bright emerald of moss where it had lodged in the crevices between the tiles. On either hand, as far as eye could see, stretched undulating downs, crowning the grim grey cliffs with green, and to the left the big headland which she had noticed from the train stood out boldly, like a protective arm thrust into the sea, sheltering the village.

"That's Wain Scar," said Jane, following her glance. "Don't you think it's all rather lovely?" she added, with an affectionate gesture which embraced the whole scene.

Elizabeth's eyes glowed.

"I should think I do!" she exclaimed. "And it's so—so English. Oh, I know I'm going to love England!"

"It must be an odd feeling to come to your own country practically as a stranger," rejoined Jane musingly.

"It's rather exciting, really. Whenever I see any specially lovely bit of scenery, or find anything particularly well run—like the trains here, for instance—I feel a patriotic thrill all down my spine."

Jane laughed outright.

"I think the train service people would be very grateful if they could hear you. They come in for more curses than compliments, as a rule," she suggested.

"Then just let the grumblers try Italy," replied Elizabeth reminiscently. "Do we pass the Abbey on our way back?" she pursued, as the car moved on once more.

"No. Frayne Abbey lies inland a little—amongst those woods behind us, while Brownleaves is about half a mile further on—down there." And she pointed to the arm of the bay which faced Wain Scar and curved into the sea at a much lower level.

Their road sloped downward now, still following the

bend of the coast, and presently the car swung in between a pair of ancient iron gates, along a winding drive with short-cropped grass and trees on either hand, and pulled up in front of a low, two-storied house. There was something very friendly and welcoming about its aspect. The mellow red brick of which it was built was half hidden by creeper, while climbing roses clustered against the walls in all their summer glory of pink and white and crimson. Over the porch the pale trumpets of golden-yellow honeysuckle were just bursting into bloom. The casement windows stood wide open to the balmy air, and through them you caught glimpses of dusky panelling flecked with the gold and silver gleams of brass and pewter.

Elizabeth was conscious of another of those patriotic thrills of which she had spoken. Nothing could be more English, more sweetly, old-fashionedly English than this charming old house. It was so essentially home-like. So that when Jane paused on the threshold and said rather wistfully, "I hope you'll be very happy at Brownleaves, my dear," she turned and flung both arms impulsively round the older woman's neck, exclaiming: "I'm *sure* I shall! How could one be anything else?"

Jane kissed her warmly. But for a moment there was a look of sadness in her eyes as they rested on the young, girlish face. That splendid certainty of eager youth in its heritage of happiness! She wished it were possible to shield Elizabeth from disillusionment—this child of Irene's, with the clear grey eyes so poignantly like Irene's own that they brought a sharp pang to her heart. Suppressing a sigh, she led the way into the house, and as they entered it a door opened and someone emerged from one of the rooms into the hall and came towards them.

"This is Colin," said Jane, and something in the quality of her voice as she introduced him told Elizabeth for how very much this brother of hers counted in her life.

"How d'you do?" Wentworth held out his hand. "We have been so looking forward to your coming—Jane and I—you can't imagine how much."

He spoke very simply, and the frank greeting, with its unaffected note of welcome, warmed Elizabeth's heart afresh. So this was the Colin who, according to Candy, was somewhat difficult at times. There was certainly little indication of it in his face. It was a trifle worn-looking, as though he and physical pain were no strangers to each other, but there was more than a touch of humour in the mouth and in the whimsical though rather weary hazel eyes which met her own. Tall and slenderly built, he stooped slightly at the shoulders, and as he crossed the hall beside her she noticed that he walked with a limp.

Tea was laid ready for them in the garden—an old-world garden which called forth an exclamation of delight from Elizabeth. A flagged path led from the house, flanked on either side by a border of old-fashioned flowers—roses and hollyhocks and tall purple foxgloves nodding to each other as the light breeze ruffled past them, while from beneath their tall stateliness a carpet of mignonette filled the air with its fragrance. The surrounding lawns were bounded by a low-cut hedge of box, which here and there had been allowed to grow tall and clipped into some quaint shape of bird or beast. Through an opening in the hedge, guarded by square-cut pillars of the same green-leaved box, the flagged path debouched on to a terrace overlooking the sea.

It was here that tea awaited them, a tea that was quite

in the picture—quaint white china sprigged with tiny rosebuds, rolls and jam accompanied by clotted cream, and a big brown home-made cake such as Elizabeth had not seen in all her wanderings on the Continent. From below came the pleasant murmur of waves lapping placidly against the rocks, while opposite, across the bay, rose up the big promontory of Wain Scar.

Elizabeth emitted a little sigh of satisfaction as she set down her cup.

"What an adorable place Brownleaves is!" she said. "Candy didn't say half enough about it."

Jane smiled.

"You forget that he always had Frayne Abbey in his mind to compare it with. When you have seen your own home you won't think so much of our little Brownleaves."

"I suppose the Abbey is really very beautiful?"

"Very," said Jane. "The house itself has been added to and partially modernised, but the actual ruins of the original old abbey have always been left untouched. They're some distance from the house and open to the public once a week—although they're not really too safe in parts. But, of course"—checking herself abruptly—"Candy will have described it all to you heaps of times."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"No, he hasn't. He's often talked of Waincliff, but never very much about the Abbey. I think it made him feel too homesick. He's longing to come back there, you know."

"Yes, I know." Jane's brown eyes clouded for a moment as Elizabeth's words brought sharply back the memory of all that had happened in the past to drive Frayne from his home. She got up rather abruptly from her chair.

"I'll just go and see if your luggage has arrived," she said in business-like tones, "and then, if it has, you'll probably like to see your room. Colin will look after you till I come back."

When she had gone Elizabeth looked across at Wentworth with a faint smile.

"I do think you and your sister are extraordinarily trustful people to allow a perfect stranger to be dumped on you like this," she remarked.

The hazel eyes returned her smile with a glance of amusement.

"The trustfulness was rather a reciprocal affair, wasn't it?" he suggested. "From my point of view, I think it called for quite a good deal on your part—to risk us! We live a very primitive kind of existence here—an undiluted country life. I hope you're prepared for that."

"You farm your own land, don't you?"

"Jane does. As you see"—a shade of bitterness crossing his face—"I'm not much good for active work—or anything else, either." Then, as though to forestall any possible expression of sympathy that his speech might have called forth, he went on, quickly: "But Jane's activities are manifold. She manages the house and servants—and me, and with the help of a man and a boy, runs our few acres and a cow—she's the best butter-maker in the district, taken prizes and all that, you know—and she fills up her spare time by breaking in horses—polo ponies, mostly."

"I shouldn't have thought she had very much spare time left to fill up," commented Elizabeth dryly.

"Oh, there's a lot of time in the country," he returned. He spoke heavily, and she was conscious of a

quick little rush of sympathy for this man who so evidently chafed against his handicap. But she made no reply, intuitively aware that he would have shrunk from any spoken sympathy at the present early stage of their acquaintance with each other. Instead, she turned the conversation into another channel.

"What is that place over there?" she asked, pointing towards Wain Scar, now growing vague and indistinct in the haze of coming evening. "Surely there's not a house on the edge of that steep cliff?"

Colin's eyes followed the direction of her hand.

"Yes, there is," he said. "It's called Lone Edge and is built practically on the very brink of the rock. It's been empty for years, but now it's been taken by an artist man of some sort. I believe he's a sculptor. I should deduce from his taking Lone Edge," he added, smiling, "that he must be a misanthrope of the deepest dye—a sort of Diogenes in a tub."

A gleam of mirth flickered in Elizabeth's eyes.

"It might be rather fun to—dig him out," she hazarded.

"If you're keen on spade-work, why not try your hand on me?" suggested Colin lightly.

"There *is* room for improvement," she admitted.

He glanced down at her whimsically.

"How would you begin?" he demanded.

"By trying to make you take a rather more cheerful view of life," she replied promptly.

At this moment Jane's voice could be heard calling her, and she rose to go back to the house. Colin checked her with a detaining hand on her arm.

"Do you know," he said slowly, "I think you're the one person who might be able to accomplish that." He

paused, looking down at her with eyes that were half quizzical, half appealing. "Will you take it on?"

She hesitated. Beneath the bantering tone she sensed an underlying note of urgency—of actual demand which startled her a little.

"I don't know," she said rather nervously. Jane's voice came once more, wafted across the garden, and she grasped hastily at the excuse to evade answering him. "There's your sister calling me again. I must run."

She hurried off, leaving him looking after her with an odd expression in his eyes—a new, awakened look of interest which had long been absent from them.

CHAPTER VI

A NEW FRIEND

ELIZABETH had spent a couple of busy hours in the garden cutting flowers, and now, laden with her spoils, she had returned to the house and was occupying herself arranging them in the various bowls and vases she had managed to collect around her. This was one of the lighter duties she had taken over from Jane soon after her arrival. At first the latter had protested when she had announced her desire to make herself useful.

"My dear, I didn't ask you here to be useful. I asked you just because I wanted to have you with us."

But Elizabeth had insisted. It had not taken her more than a day or two to realise that Jane's hands were quite full enough—too full, in fact—with the management of her ponies and the little farm and dairy, to say nothing of looking after Colin, who, of course, was as helpless as most men in regard to the darning of socks and sewing on of buttons. So she had brushed aside Jane's protests with a persuasive: "But I'd *like* to be useful. Do let me. It will make Brownleaves feel like home if I'm allowed to." And Jane, sturdy, independent Jane, had capitulated, and already, though only a fortnight had elapsed since her arrival, Elizabeth had begun to carve for herself a little niche of her own in the daily life at Brownleaves.

It was a life that interested her by reason of its very contrast with the one to which she had been accustomed,

nor could she help comparing Jane's voluntarily busy, hardworking existence with the utterly idle and self-indulgent one led by her pretty, spoilt stepmother.

The Wentworths, although not wealthy from the Fraynes' standpoint of wealth, were comparatively well-off, but Jane, having once set her hand to the plough, as it were, ran the little farm, with its dairy and poultry and pigs, in as business-like fashion as though their living actually depended upon it.

"I can't bear half doing a thing," she told Elizabeth in the bright, determined way which the latter had quickly learnt to know as characteristic of her. On another occasion, when Elizabeth had affectionately chided her for working so hard, she had answered with a note of quiet gravity in her voice: "My dear, work is the only remedy that can be relied upon to pull you through—certain things. It at least stops you from thinking." And Elizabeth, remembering how Candy had once told her that the man Jane should have married had been killed during the war, suddenly found herself able to interpret the older woman's self-imposed activity—interpret it with a passion of pity and understanding that welled over into a deep affection.

To-day, she was alone. Colin and Jane had driven off in the car soon after lunch, bound for Starranbridge, a fairly large market town about eight miles away, where the latter had some shopping to do, and now, as she put the finishing touches to her last bowl of flowers, it occurred to Elizabeth that she might skip tea and fill up the time till their return by taking a stroll along the sands. There was a way down to the shore from the terrace, a steep, winding path with roughly hewn steps cut here and there into the surface of the shelving cliff.

"If you please, miss, Dr. Sutherland's called. Shall I say you're in or out?"

Sarah, the elderly servant who had been Jane's devoted henchwoman ever since she and Colin had kept house together, broke in abruptly upon Elizabeth's half-formed plans. She was a somewhat hard-featured woman with an abrupt, unprepossessing manner and a way of "speaking her mind" which not infrequently struck terror to the heart of the young housemaid who worked under her and completed the household staff at Brownleaves. But she worshipped the ground the Wentworths walked on, and would cheerfully have gone to the stake for either or both of them if it would have profited them any. Fortunately, Elizabeth had found favour in her eyes and she had elected to adopt her as one of "the family" before she had been in the house three days.

"Shall I say you're in, miss?"

"But I've never met Dr. Sutherland," objected Elizabeth hesitatingly.

"No, miss, of course you haven't, seeing he's been away on his holiday ever since you came here. There's been a local teemings doing his work for him—and a very poor job he's made of it, so they say."

Elizabeth suppressed a smile.

"A locum-tenens, you mean, Sarah."

"Yes, miss, that's what I was saying," agreed Sarah, unmoved. "And there's Mrs. Jennings, the grocer's wife, nearly dead of her first baby, and the baby lying cold in its coffin, and the post-mistress, what's never known a day's illness before, in bed with a bad leg this ten days, and——"

"Oh, stop, stop!" exclaimed Elizabeth, laughing in

spite of herself. "It's evidently high time Dr. Sutherland came back. Did you tell him that Miss Wentworth and her brother had gone into Starranbridge?"

"Yes, miss. But I told him that you were here, only I didn't know if you were in or out. Nor I didn't, rightly," continued Sarah, whose stern moral code demanded some justification for even so slight a deviation from the strict truth. "You might have been in the garden, cutting they flowers at the moment, for all I knew different. Pretty, aren't they?" she added, scrutinising Elizabeth's blossom-filled bowls and vases judicially. "You've a lighter hand with 'em than Miss Jane. Same with pastry—it's astonishing how folks vary. Now, I've seen——"

"Where have you left Dr. Sutherland all this time?" broke in Elizabeth, hurriedly bringing her back to the point.

"He's on the front door-step, Miss."

"Well, you'd better ask him in, after leaving the poor man on the door-step all this time. Miss Jane's sure to be back soon. And bring tea out on to the terrace, Sarah."

"Very good, miss." Sarah marched out of the room, to return within a few minutes ushering in the visitor.

"This is Miss Frayne, doctor," she announced abruptly, and departed, closing the door with a crisp snap behind her.

Elizabeth and the new-comer surveyed each other in silence for a brief instant, then, with one accord, they both burst out laughing.

"I think that constitutes an introduction, doesn't it?" said Jack Sutherland, holding out his hand.

He was a big, spare, loose-limbed man, somewhere

in the middle forties, although there was a certain boyishness about his whole personality that detracted from his years. As Sarah had once observed: "The doctor's got a young way with him." Elizabeth liked him at once. There was something very attractive about his lean, eager face, hair just turning grey at the temples, and oddly luminous eyes, a nondescript grey-brown in colour, with fine lines of kindliness and humour puckering their corners.

"And, anyway," he went on in a friendly fashion, when they had shaken hands, "I don't think you and I need stand on ceremony with each other. If being at school and college with your father isn't a pretty sound introduction, I don't know what would be."

"I know. I've often heard Candy speak of you. You used to stay at the Abbey, didn't you?"

Sutherland nodded.

"Yes, I was practising in London then and used to run down from town occasionally. I didn't buy the Waincliff practice until after Frayne had gone abroad. I'm glad he's coming back to settle down here at last," he added heartily. "And he's sent a very charming advance-guard to herald in the new era"—smiling. "I heard all about your coming to Brownleaves before I went for my holiday—Jane could talk of nothing else."

Elizabeth smiled back.

"And I've heard quite a lot about you, both from Jane —*and* Sarah; According to the latter, the village is in imminent danger of decimation in consequence of your absence."

"I know." Sutherland's face took on a sudden gravity. "It makes one feel as if one ought never to take a holiday. Village folk—bless 'em for their loyalty!—get

such a belief in their own particular medical man that they simply decline to do anything another fellow tells them to—and then the trouble begins. I've been round to see the worst cases since I got back, and I think they're all going on all right now—except Mrs. Jenning's baby. And nothing and no one could have saved its life, poor little beggar. I believe I've convinced her of that, and she's a bit happier in the thought. It's the possibility of the 'might have been,' that worries people, you know," he went on. "Make them realise that there *was* no 'might have been,' that the thing was inevitable, and they'll stand up to it like the bricks they are."

Elizabeth's face softened. She could understand, now that she had seen the man, the source of his popularity in the neighbourhood. That big-hearted "understandingness" of his would bring him very close to the hearts of rich and poor alike. The villagers' attachment to him manifested itself in the familiar appellation of "Doctor Jack," the name by which he was generally known amongst them. During the war he had been half worshipped by the men he had tended at the front, and the Tommies who had come home again to their native village after it was all over had brought the affectionate little sobriquet back with them. And it had stuck.

A sudden thought crossed Elizabeth's mind.

"Did you have any lunch?" she demanded. She guessed that he must have reached Waincliff by the two o'clock train, and in that case, if he had been visiting patients ever since his arrival, he could have had no opportunity for a meal of any kind.

His eyes twinkled boyishly.

"Well, no," he admitted. "I didn't. After I'd been my round I was so anxious to get over here and see Jane

—and Colin—that I'm afraid I forgot all about it."

There was a scarcely perceptible pause before the "and Colin," and Elizabeth smiled secretly to herself. Aloud, all she said was:

"Then I prescribe sandwiches and a whisky-and-soda instead of tea. I'll go and tell Sarah."

"I say—that's awfully kind of you," he said gratefully. "But please don't trouble."

"I'm quite sure Jane—and Colin—would wish it," replied Elizabeth with perfect gravity, and forthwith departed on her errand.

When she returned she found him regarding her array of flower-filled vases with appreciative eyes.

"These look jolly," he said. "Where do they all go? Can't I help you put them in their places?"

She nodded.

"Yes, if you like. And by that time I expect Sarah will have everything ready for us."

He helped her dispose of her flowers about the house in a friendly big-brother fashion that only served to increase her liking for him, and when this was accomplished they went out through the garden and established themselves on the terrace.

"And how do you think you're going to like Waincliff after all your wanderings abroad?" asked Sutherland conversationally, as he squirted soda-water into his glass.

Elizabeth sipped her tea.

"I'm going to like it," she said decidedly. "Of course I miss Candy—we've always been such pals, you know."

"I know. I gathered that on the one or two occasions he and I have met in London, when he ran over from the Continent. I think"—smiling—"if I were Candy's wife I should be rather jealous of Candy's daughter."

It had been very innocently uttered, but in an instant he divined from the slight change of expression which crossed Elizabeth's face that he had inadvertently laid his finger on a sore spot.

"I say!" he exclaimed ruefully, with a boyish outspokenness that was typical of him. "I'm awfully sorry —I'm afraid I've put my foot into it?"

Her eyes danced with mirth.

"You did rather get home on that," she admitted, adding, with an innate sense of fair play: "But it's quite understandable, I think. Violet—you met her once in London, didn't you?—simply worships Candy, and naturally she'd like him all to herself. So should I"—humorously. "So I can quite understand her wanting it. Can't you?"

"Quite. And I'm very glad to hear she does worship him, as it's easy enough to see he's absolutely devoted to her. She really does?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"Oh, yes. Frankly, my stepmother and I haven't much in common——" She paused uncertainly.

"No, I should imagine that perfectly possible." Mentally, Sutherland recalled his memory of Frayne's second wife as she had struck him when he met her in London—very charming, very spoilt, with little or no recognition of the big values in life—and compared her swiftly and unfavourably with Frayne's daughter.

"But still," continued Elizabeth honestly, "she *does* love Candy, and his love for her is the one big thing in her life. I think she would sacrifice anything and everything to keep that. She's even nice to me and tries to like me because she knows that he'd be awfully un-

happy about it if we didn't pull along pretty well together."

"I shouldn't think she finds that very difficult," commented Sutherland. "Will she like living in the country, do you think?" he went on, his mind going apprehensively back to the time when poor, beautiful, passionate Irene—the mother of this clear-eyed child he was talking to—had sought a quick and tragic way out of the monotony and dullness which were stifling her, grasping recklessly at happiness only to find it crumble to pieces in her hand.

"Oh, yes, I think so," answered Elizabeth. "She couldn't very well help loving the Abbey," she added warmly, "could she?"

"You've seen it, then?"

She nodded.

"Yes, Jane took me over one day. It's a very lovely home to be going to."

"A size larger than Brownleaves?" suggested Sutherland, smiling.

She smiled back.

"Yes. But I shall always be glad I came to Brownleaves first. I should never have learnt to know Jane in the same way if I hadn't actually lived in the same house with her."

"And Jane is worth knowing, isn't she?" he said. He spoke very quietly, without any emphasis, yet there was a certain note in his voice—a kind of suppressed tensity —that arrested Elizabeth's attention. She looked across at him.

"Jane is—wonderful," she said simply.

He was silent for a moment. Then:

"More wonderful than people guess. It takes a very

big heart and a very broad mind not to feel the faintest occasional bitterness and resentment against someone whose life has been bought at the cost of the life which meant most to you in the world."

Elizabeth looked at him interrogatively.

"I don't think I quite understand. You're speaking of the man Jane was engaged to, aren't you—the man who was killed in the war?"

"Yes—Dick Fenton. You've never heard how he lost his life, then?" She shook her head, and he went on: "It's a tragic story—everyone in Waincliff knows it, of course. Fenton and Colin were together most of the time at the front, and both went through three years of it without a scratch. And then, one day, their luck broke. With a handful of others they were caught in a terribly tight corner, had to beat a retreat, and Colin got left behind, too badly wounded to move. When he discovered it, Fenton went back under hell's own fire and brought him in, and just as they reached the lines Fenton himself dropped dead, shot clean through the head."

"Oh, *poor* Jane!" Elizabeth's breath caught strickenly on the half-whispered words.

"Yes. Poor Jane. And the queer—and wonderful—part of it is that although, before that, she and Colin had never seemed particularly attached to each other—nothing more between them than the ordinary tolerant liking which exists between heaps of brothers and sisters—ever since then she has been simply devoted to him. You would have expected that Fenton's death—such a death—would have been more likely to set them further apart than ever."

Before she could make any answer the sound of voices broke on their ears, and a minute later Colin and Jane

could be seen approaching by way of the flagged path from the house.

"Sarah told us you were here," exclaimed Jane, holding out both hands to Sutherland as soon as she came within speaking distance. "O Wise Man, it's good to see you back again!"

"And it's good to see you," he answered, taking her hands and holding them for a moment in his big ones.

"It seems you've not come back before you were wanted," put in Colin. "Half Waincliff has been clamouring for your return."

"Of course," Jane nodded up at Sutherland. "You see we can't do without our Wise Man, even for so short a time."

"Well, you must let the poor devil have an occasional holiday," protested Colin, amused. "What's the latest news, Jack? I hear you've already been round to see some of your patients, so you're sure to have picked up something in the way of gossip. You going to have some of this stewed tea, Jane, or a decent Christian whisky-and-soda like your little brother?"

"Neither," replied Jane promptly. "Sarah's making some fresh tea. Here she comes with it."

For half an hour or so they all chatted away together, exchanging small items of personal news and knitting up the threads which had been temporarily severed by Sutherland's short absence from Waincliff.

"By the way," said Jane presently, "the new owner of Lone Edge has arrived since you went away. His name is Blair Maitland, and he appears to be something of a mystery. No one has seen him yet, and a general idea has got about that he doesn't want visitors."

"I've seen him," said Sutherland. "I ran into him

this afternoon, coming out of the post office, after I'd been to visit Mrs. Jennings. And, oddly enough, I happen to know him." Both the women emitted a little murmur of feminine interest. "He was under my care for a time out at the front," pursued Sutherland. "Pretty badly wounded, too. But at that time he was known as Private Smithers."

"Smithers?" The word came in astonished chorus.

"Then how has he become Maitland now?" asked Elizabeth, her eyes travelling with a certain curiosity in them towards the solitary grey house which seemed almost to overhang the steep side of Wain Scar, so close to the edge had it been built.

"Well, I never thought that Smithers was his real name," said the doctor, with a faint smile of amusement. "He didn't look in the least like a Smithers—or talk like one, not even when he was delirious, and he was off his head for several days."

"The mystery thickens," observed Colin sententiously.

"Yes. Now I wonder why he enlisted under a false name?" said Jane musingly. "There was no reason for it during the war, when half the men one knew were only rankers."

"What age was he, Jack?" asked Colin.

"Oh, he was quite a youngster then—he must be about thirty-three now."

"Then I expect some love affair was at the back of it," pursued Colin indulgently. "Probably his best girl had turned him down, and he rushed off to the war as 'Smithers' with some youthfully romantic idea of cutting himself off for ever from his former life—you know the sort of stunt I mean."

Sutherland nodded.

"Possibly you're right. Sounds a feasible explanation, anyway," he said casually. But his eyes were curiously thoughtful and reflective.

"Did he explain to you that he was no longer Smithers?" inquired Jane.

"Yes, quite naturally. Said he'd taken the name Maitland along with some money he'd inherited."

"I think he was in luck," commented Colin dryly, "getting rid of a name like Smithers and acquiring lumps of bullion at one and the same time."

Presently the conversation drifted to other topics, and not long afterwards Sutherland took his departure, leaving Elizabeth with a pleasant feeling that the day had brought her a new friend.

CHAPTER VII

THE RED-HAIRED GIRL

IT was a lovely sunny morning. Overhead, the sky stretched away to the sea's horizon in a sweep of cloudless blue. Nevertheless, blue skies and golden sunlight notwithstanding, there was that little nip of freshness in the air which September brings to remind one that summer's reign is over and that she is slowly and reluctantly making way for autumn.

Elizabeth had been out for a long tramp across the downs beyond Wain Scar, and now a glance at her watch warned her that she must turn back at once if she wished to be home in time for lunch. She began retracing her steps as quickly as possible, running a short distance now and again when the going was good. Her way led past the confines of Lone Edge—confines very definitely emphasised by a high stone wall enclosing the ragged bit of land belonging to it. There were many stories current amongst the villagers concerning the man who had originally built the place. Some said that he had been a successful jewel thief who had eluded identification at the hands of the law and subsequently built himself this refuge out of his ill-gotten gains; others that he had been a scientist who performed elaborate experiments in his lonely eyrie overlooking the sea; others again that he had been merely a wealthy eccentric, obsessed by a rooted antipathy to his fellowmen. Whatever the truth, he must unquestionably have

been a man of considerable means, as the building of a house in such a precarious position on the top of a steep cliff could not but have proved a costly whim to gratify, and rumour ran that it lacked nothing in the way of modern luxury and convenience. In any case, the unfortunate man had lived but a year in which to enjoy his dearly-bought seclusion, and since his death, ten years previously, the house had remained empty until the man whom Sutherland had known as Private Smithers purchased it for what was probably a tenth of its original cost.

Elizabeth regarded the high stone wall which surrounded it with extreme disfavour as she realised that if she could only cut across the Lone Edge land, instead of going round it, she would save at least a mile of her return journey. At one place a stout oak door was let into the wall, but this was always kept locked on the inside, she knew—she had tried the latch unsuccessfully on more than one previous occasion. However, urged by the fact of her lateness, she lifted the latch half-heartedly as she passed, though without any real hope of gaining entrance. To her surprise, on this occasion the door yielded—evidently, by someone's oversight, the key had not been turned in the lock—and she found herself within the guarded precincts of Lone Edge.

She made a small grimace of disappointment as she passed through the doorway. There was nothing of particular interest to be seen—nothing, apparently, to warrant the special precautions which the original owner had taken to keep people outside—merely a few pasture fields, separated by high hedges, together with some uncultivated grassland, overgrown by furze and bramble,

amid which rabbits scuttled hither and thither with the scurrying movement peculiar to their species. Beyond, towards the brow of the cliff, one caught glimpses of the garden within which the house itself was set, lawns, splashed with colour from half-hidden flower-beds, showing here and there betwixt tall trees and shrubs. Only the upper portion of the house was visible, a big barn-like structure, well windowed and partially roofed in with glass, occupying the foreground and completely hiding the lower story from Elizabeth's view.

She bestowed a quick glance round, and, assured that there was no one in sight to discover her in the act of trespassing, she made her way as rapidly as she could across the fields, following the downward trend of the headland towards the village. Presently the drive which bordered the fields, extending from the house to a small lodge at the gates, came into view, and Elizabeth anticipated with some amusement the probable astonishment of the lodge-keeper at having to let someone out who had actually no business to be in. After all, she reflected philosophically, the worst he could do would be to growl rebuke at her—and she would have saved herself at least a mile's further walking. So she hurried on, threading her way between the furze and blackberry bushes, and finally broke into a run down the gentle slope which was all that now intervened betwixt her and the drive itself.

The next instant, without the slightest warning, she pitched headlong forward, as suddenly as though she had been shot, and fell full length on the ground. For the moment she lay still where she had fallen, half stunned by the shock, and when at last she tried to pick herself up she became conscious of a sharp, tearing pain in her foot. With difficulty she managed to drag herself into

a sitting posture, but the excruciating pain caused by the movement drew all the blood from her face and left her white and panting. Dizzily she realised that she must have sprained her ankle rather badly, and she was just wondering what on earth she should do when she heard quick footsteps behind her and a woman's voice said:

"You've hurt yourself, haven't you? I was coming down the drive and saw you fall."

The voice was an uneducated one, and when Elizabeth looked up to see who had spoken she received a shock of astonishment, speech and speaker were so utterly at variance with each other. The girl standing beside her, gazing down at her solicitously, was of such unusual beauty that for a moment she made no attempt to answer her, but merely stared at her in spontaneous admiration. She was slightly built, with all the slender immaturity of youth, and, in spite of the indifferent cut and quality of her clothes, it was easy to recognise the beautiful poise and modelling of her figure. Dark chestnut-red hair gleamed from beneath a small green hat, and, in the bright sunshine, the golden-brown eyes beneath the long, low arch of her brows seemed to reflect the same glowing warmth as her hair. The modelling of her face was exquisite, beautifully proportioned as that of her body, and her skin was wellnigh flawless—of that rare, almost dazzling fairness which is sometimes found as an adjunct to red hair.

"Here, can't I help you?" continued the new-comer, and again the commonness of her intonation struck curiously on the ear, seeming out of all harmony with her extreme beauty. "Let me help you up."

She held out her hands, and, biting her lips to keep back the cry of pain which the effort cost her, Elizabeth,

with the other's assistance, managed to struggle into an upright position. But she could not endure the least weight upon the injured foot, and found herself forced to lean heavily on the round young arm which was supporting her.

"I'm afraid I can't walk," she said rather faintly.

"It doesn't look as if you can," replied the girl. "You came a regular cropper down that hill, didn't you? I expect you caught your foot in a rabbit hole. Tell you what, I'll have to go and get help from the house. But I'll help you to sit down again first—you can't stand, that's plain." She suited the action to the words, quite competently and with a rough kind of tenderness.

"It's very kind of you, Miss——" Elizabeth paused questioningly.

The other smiled, showing a row of even white teeth.

"Miss nothing-at-all. I'm just Poppy—Poppy Ridgway. Now I'll be off back to the house and ask Mr. Maitland to come along."

She was gone, leaving Elizabeth to nurse her ankle and wonder who she was and what position she occupied in Maitland's household. Presently she saw a little group of people emerge from the house and come towards her —Poppy herself, accompanied by two men, the second of whom, walking a few paces in the rear, was unmistakably an indoor servant. But it was upon the man at Poppy's side that Elizabeth's eyes riveted themselves in frank astonishment. There was no mistaking that lean, sinewy figure with its supple ease of movement, and as he drew nearer she could see the same look of surprised recognition leap into his blue eyes as was in her own. Her thoughts flashed back to that afternoon of storm on Lake Como, when, but for this man's timely

help, she herself would have gone down with the *Carlotta.* A queer little thrill shot through her, making her forget for a moment the throbbing pain in her ankle —a thrill that was half excitement at the discovery that her "brown man" of Italy was one and the same person as Blair Maitland, the new owner of Lone Edge, half an odd kind of shyness provoked by the unexpectedness of this second encounter.

"So we meet again," he said coolly, as he reached her side. "I must say"—regarding her with a glint of amusement in his eyes—"that you seem to have a positive genius for getting yourself into difficulties."

"On the last occasion, at any rate, you showed an equal genius for getting me out of them," she answered, smiling.

"It's a sprained ankle this time, Poppy tells me," he said. "Let me have a look at it."

He knelt down at her side, and, lifting her foot from the ground, he began feeling the injured part with sensitive, searching fingers. In spite of herself, she winced under his touch.

"Is it so bad?" he said sympathetically. "It's very much swollen. We must get you back to the house and bind it up for you. But first, I think, you'd better let me get that shoe off before your foot swells any more."

Elizabeth drew back involuntarily. The bare idea of taking off her shoe, in which already the swollen foot was feeling compressed and tight, sent a small shudder of apprehension through her.

"I'll give you as little pain as I can," he said, divining her fear, "but I'm afraid it's bound to hurt a bit. Only, the longer it's left the worse it will be. Will you trust me to do it as gently as possible?"

Meeting his glance, which held a curious, insistent demand, her own fell. She made a slight motion of assent, then set her teeth, determined that no amount of pain should wring a cry from her, while he unlaced the shoe, loosening it as much as possible, and then with firm and gentle fingers, drew it off. But for all her determination a little moan escaped her, in spite of herself.

"There—that's over," said Maitland reassuringly. "Now the next thing is to get you back to the house. You help me, Morris," he went on, turning to the manservant. "We must carry her. And you run on ahead, Poppy, and tell Mrs. Morris to have some hot water and bandages ready."

Poppy nodded and flew off in the direction of the house, and, weary though she was, Elizabeth's eyes could not but follow her, noticing how easily and lightly she sped up the drive. All her movements held a kind of fawn-like grace. Maitland's glance took the same direction, briefly approving. Then he answered the unconscious interrogation in Elizabeth's face.

"She's a model," he said. "I'm a sculptor, you know"—smiling—"in the intervals when I'm not saving you from the consequences of your own foolhardiness."

"I know I was trespassing," admitted Elizabeth contritely. "But I was late for lunch—and you'd left that door of yours temptingly unlocked."

"As far as I'm concerned it can remain unlocked. The gardener here, who has been caretaker while the place was empty, is the Cerberus of bolts and bars. He was gardener to the original owner, who would never allow anyone inside that wall"—nodding towards the high stone barricade which enclosed the property—"and he still carries on the old tradition"—smiling—"even though I've

told him it's a matter of complete indifference to me if people choose to make a short cut across the Lone Edge fields. Now"—stooping over her and slipping a strong arm around her—"Morris and I are going to carry you up to the house."

Between them the two men managed it very successfully, and Elizabeth found herself finally deposited on a couch in a cosy sitting-room, while Morris's wife, who acted as Maitland's housekeeper, hovered in the offing with hot water and numerous strips of linen which would serve as bandages.

"I'll attend to the damage, Mrs. Morris," said Maitland, quietly, and he took composed possession of the basin of hot water and the linen strips. Then, his glance taking in Elizabeth's white face—for, notwithstanding the care exerted by the two men who carried her, she had found the journey to the house a somewhat painful one—he added: "Bring some brandy here."

With capable, wonderfully tender hands he proceeded to bathe and bind up the injured limb, while Poppy stood looking on. Once, when Elizabeth flinched a little, he laid his hand quickly over hers.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice a trifle roughened.

As though that slight roughening in his voice struck significantly on her ear, Poppy glanced at him with swift, searching eyes. A curious expression came into her face, making it look all at once older—a woman's face, no longer a girl's. It was as though some sudden fear had found place in her mind.

"Do you want me any longer?" she asked abruptly, almost rudely.

Maitland looked up from his task of binding up Elizabeth's ankle.

"No," he said, "you can go home, Poppy. Be here to-morrow at ten o'clock, will you?" It was more in the nature of an order than anything else, uttered with a careless certainty that it would be obeyed.

The quick colour flared up under Poppy's clear skin, and for a moment an odd, slumbering light woke in the tawny depths of her eyes. Then she swung round on her heel and marched to the door.

"All right," she said bluntly. "I'll go."

CHAPTER VIII

UNDERCURRENTS

AS Poppy left the room, hurrying blindly out of it, she brushed past Mrs. Morris, who was coming in with the brandy at the same moment, in a fashion which roused that good woman to indignation.

"Humph! Miss Ridgway's needing a lesson in manners, I'm thinking," she remarked with some asperity as she set down the tray she was carrying.

Maitland bestowed a satisfied glance upon Elizabeth's neatly bandaged ankle, then looked up at his housekeeper with a glance of amusement.

"Isn't she respectful enough, Morry?" he inquired.

"Indeed she's not, sir—pushing past like that, and me with a cut-glass decanter and glasses on my tray," replied Mrs. Morris wrathfully. "If the truth were told, sir, you spoil her so that she hardly knows whether she's on her head or her heels—and she naught but a grocer's daughter, when all's said and done."

"Granddaughter, Morry," corrected Maitland, smiling. "There's often quite a lot of difference between being a grocer's daughter and a grocer's granddaughter—as you'd learn if you lived in fashionable society."

"Then all I can say, sir, is that I'm thankful the Lord saw fit to cast my lot amongst plain folks what don't make flesh of one and fowl of another when they've both sprung from the same root." With which graphic mix-

ing of her metaphors Mrs. Morris took her departure.

Maitland picked up a glass and, pouring a small quantity of neat brandy into it, held it out to Elizabeth.

"Now just a swallow that," he said, "and then I think you'll be fit for me to run you back to your home in the car."

She made a grimace of distaste, but with the recollection still lively in her memory of a former occasion when he had insisted upon his way she drank it without protest. The raw spirit pulled her together, and soon the colour came creeping back into her face again.

"By the way, where *is* your home?" inquired Maitland as he took the empty glass from her. "I'm a newcomer here and quite ignorant so far of the whereabouts of my neighbours."

"I'm staying with friends," she explained—"with the Wentworths, across the bay at Brownleaves. I'm Elizabeth Frayne," she added.

He nodded.

"Then I think the best thing I can do, Elizabeth Frayne, is to take you back to your friends—and, if I were you, I should let Dr. Sutherland have a look at that ankle of yours. After all, I'm only an amateur at bandaging."

"Quite a good amateur, I think," she replied, smiling. "You know Jack—Dr. Sutherland, don't you?" she went on conversationally.

His face clouded suddenly, as if the reference to his knowledge of Sutherland brought back some memory that still had power to hurt.

"He doctored me up when I was at the front," he returned shortly. "That's the whole extent of my acquaintance with him."

Then, as though the subject were a distasteful one, he

rang the bell and abruptly ordered his car to be brought round. When it came, with Morris's help he carried her out to it and settled her comfortably with additional cushions and a footstool—the quiet care he took for her comfort in curious contrast to his dry, off-hand manner —and presently they were speeding down the drive. As they passed the barn-like erection which had attracted Elizabeth's attention when she first found herself within the precincts of Lone Edge, she saw that it did not actually adjoin the main building but was approached on one side by a covered way from the house. On the other it had a wooden door giving direct egress to the garden.

"What is that building?" she asked curiously.

"That," he said, glancing at it, "constitutes the principal reason why I brought Lone Edge. I imagine the original owner probably built it in order to conduct his experiments at a safe distance from the house—I've heard he was a chemist. For me, it makes as fine a studio as a man could wish."

"Do you do a great deal of work, then?" she inquired.

A humorous little smile crossed his face. In this remote corner of the world, it seemed, the name of Blair Maitland was unknown. In London there were plenty of society women who would have paid almost any fee if they could have induced him to perpetuate their pretty heads in marble. But it was well known there that Maitland was financially independent of his art and only worked when he chose and as he chose, and that for most of the work which he had exhibited and which had brought him a relatively good measure of fame he employed one model and one only—a very beautiful girl of partly Italian extraction. The only other thing commonly known about him was that he lived more or less the life

of a recluse, rarely going out into society, and if by chance one of the aforesaid pretty women contrived by hook or by crook to get him to her house, he preserved a cool detachment of manner towards the world at large that only added to the general eagerness to know him better. So that Elizabeth's innocent question brought a faintly reminiscent smile to his lips.

"I work when the spirit moves me," he replied lightly. "But, like most people, I've an excellent capacity for idling."

When they reached Brownleaves they found Colin standing at the gate, looking irresolutely up and down the road, his face clouded with anxiety. It cleared as if by magic when he recognised Elizabeth as one of the occupants of the approaching car.

"I was just going to organise a search party," he said as the motor throbbed to a standstill. "Jane and I have been frightfully worried as to what could have become of you. The trouble was that we didn't know in which direction you'd gone."

Elizabeth proceeded to introduce the two men, explaining what had happened, and Maitland suggested that Wentworth should drive on to the house with them.

"This is the second time Mr. Maitland has come to my rescue," she continued gaily to Colin as the car purred up the drive. "You remember my telling you and Jane how I nearly got drowned on Lake Como? Well, it was Mr. Maitland who came out after me in his motor-boat."

"Assisting damsels in distress appears to be a hobby of his," commented Colin shortly. The ungraciousness of his manner was very apparent, and Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder at him in surprise. He was staring

straight in front of him with a curious expression in his eyes—the sort of sullen, brooding expression which usually only one of his "bad days" was wont to bring there—and, feeling chilled and a trifle snubbed, she relapsed into silence for the remainder of the brief journey up to the house.

Jane, who had caught the sound of the approaching motor, was eagerly awaiting them in the porch, and a look of relief overspread her face as Elizabeth waved reassuringly. As soon as introductions and explanations had been effected, Maitland proposed carrying the latter indoors, and Colin, who had already descended from the car, limped round to the front, prepared to help. Maitland, intent only on securing the injured foot from any sudden jar, regarded him doubtfully.

"Can you manage it, do you think?" he asked.

Colin coloured hotly. He was shrinkingly sensitive regarding any allusion to his lameness.

"I'm not altogether a cripple," he returned haughtily, and Elizabeth knew in a moment that the seed of hostility had been sown between the two men—by Blair Maitland, concerned only for her safety, inadvertently by Colin, stung to a deliberate retaliation.

She was still conscious of that inimical undercurrent when, the business of carrying her into the house successfully accomplished, Jane made the practical suggestion that they should all have lunch.

"Colin and I were too worried about Elizabeth to eat anything," she declared, "and it seemed that neither she nor you," nodding towards Maitland, "have had time to think about a meal. You'll stay, won't you?"

He hesitated a moment, as though on the brink of refusing. Then, apparently changing his mind, he ac-

cepted rather briefly. Colin went towards the door.

"I'm going to send word to Sutherland to come up here. He'd better have a look at Elizabeth's foot," he explained.

"There's not the least need," protested Elizabeth vigorously. "He couldn't do anything more for it. Mr. Maitland has bound it up splendidly. It's hardly aching at all now."

But Colin looked obstinately unconvinced.

"First aid's all very well, but a doctor's verdict is more satisfactory," he replied, and disappeared on his errand.

Despite the combined endeavours of Elizabeth and Jane, lunch proved a somewhat awkward meal. Colin's manner betrayed every now and again the irritability which the other man's unfortunate reference to his lameness had aroused, and Maitland himself preserved a baffling reticence that made him a somewhat difficult subject to converse with. As Jane expressed it after he had gone: "There seemed nothing to talk about except the present moment. The man might never have had any past existence at all for all the reference he made to it. I don't feel as though I knew him one bit better than when he arrived." Elizabeth was fain to acknowledge to herself that the "brown man" who had shared her adventure on Lake Como seemed somehow altered—to have grown more remote and unapproachable than on that memorable occasion.

They were alone together just for a moment preceding his departure, and she took the chance to thank him half laughingly for his "medical attendance."

"I'm sure, when Jack comes, he'll say you've missed your vocation—that you ought to have been a doctor-

man," she said, as they shook hands. Adding spontaneously: "I'm ever so glad we've met again."

But the shy warmth of her impulsive little speech brought no response, and in the silence which followed she drew her hand quickly out of his grasp, an embarrassed flush mounting to her very forehead.

"Evidently you don't reciprocate my sentiments," she said, forcing a smile that might cover her embarrassment.

"No, I don't," he said bluntly. "I think it would have been better if we hadn't met again. But since we have——" He paused, looking down at her with a curiously unfathomable expression in his eyes—an expression that somehow sent her pulses beating more quickly.

"Since we have?" she queried rather low.

"Since we have—why, *che sarà sarà.*"

He turned with characteristic abruptness and left her, and a few minutes later she heard his car pass down the drive.

CHAPTER IX

CONFIDENCES

FROM her couch, which had been pulled into the bay of the window, Elizabeth could look across the garden to where, beyond the walled edge of the terrace, the sea lay sparkling in the clear September sunshine. No one could have wished for a more enchanting outlook, but even the most delightful view is liable to pall when you have been tied to a couch and forced to look at it by the hour together, and, during the time she had been forbidden to put her injured foot to the ground, she had grown a trifle restive. As Sarah phrased it: "Miss Frayne's not one to be laid aside with a good grace. She's young-like, and 'twouldn't be nature if she was."

Nevertheless, Elizaeth was fain to acknowledge that the period during which she had been "laid aside" had had its alleviations, since she had been thoroughly petted and spoilt by all and sundry. Sutherland—perhaps not wholly disinterestedly, since Brownleaves was also Jane's abiding-place—had made the medical inspection of the injured ankle an excuse for a daily visit. He generally arrived accompanied by some flowers or a box of chocolates, and, no matter how busy he was, he always managed to stay and chat with the patient in his jolly, cheery way for a few minutes at least.

Still, if Sarah had but known it, there had been something other behind Elizabeth's restlessness than mere impatience at being temporarily an invalid. She was

puzzled—puzzled and a little hurt by the fact that, although some days had elapsed since her accident, Blair Maitland had neither come over to see her, nor had he even sent a message of inquiry as to how she was progressing. Apparently, having restored her to the care of her friends, he had ceased to take any interest in her whatever. And Elizabeth was woman enough to feel both hurt and resentful.

Unconsciously she had been living in an attitude of expectancy, anticipating his coming, and as day succeeded day, bringing no sign, her feminine pride chafed under what she was coming to regard as a deliberate slight. Bitterly, now, she repented her impulsive utterance: "I'm ever so glad we've met again." The bluntness of his answer rankled in her memory. At the time, something in his tone as he had spoken, something in the expression of his face, had neutralised the ungraciousness of his speech—had even made it seem to hold a significance quite contrary to that expressed by the actual words. But now she could only believe that he had meant precisely what he said—that it would have been better if they had not met again. And the recollection that she had shown a spontaneous friendliness which had not been reciprocated stung her pride unbearably.

Womanlike, the smart of her resentment towards Maitland drove her into being more responsive than usual towards Colin. They had become good friends, these two, and now his consistent care of her since her accident at Lone Edge had taught her a pretty habit of dependence that kept him constantly beside her. Sometimes they talked, or else he read to her, at others he would play the piano while she listened entranced, for he was naturally a very fine musician and suffering had made him a

better one, and the notes would sing and laugh and cry beneath the touch of his sensitive fingers. And it was during these long intimate hours together that Elizabeth had come to know the real Colin, the essential lovableness of his nature, with its whimsical charm, and the bitterness which the fact of his physical handicap had superimposed upon it.

All the years that had elapsed since an enemy bullet had torn through nerve and sinew, laming him for life, had not sufficed to soften his inner rebellion against the fate which had dealt him such a blow, a rebellion that showed itself less in a lack of endurance—for he stood the recurrent pain he suffered with fortitude and demanded no concessions on account of his lameness—as in a smouldering jealousy of other men and a certain warped severity of judgment. It was one afternoon when she had chanced to mention Poppy Ridgway to him that Elizabeth had a glimpse of both these qualities.

"Poppy is a young person with whom you have nothing to do," he remarked shortly. "She's not of your world."

"She is very beautiful," returned Elizabeth.

"But not at all good. In fact, she's a thorough little rotter."

"Tell me about her." Poppy had at first only interested her by reason of her amazing beauty, but the fact that the girl's life was to some extent linked up with that of Maitland had subconsciously invested her with another and more poignant interest in Elizabeth's mind.

"She is a very ordinary little sinner," said Colin, shrugging his shoulders. "Her parents died when she was quite a small child, and she was brought up in the village here by her grandmother—old Granny Ridgway,

you know, who keeps the grocery shop at the top of the street. A little over two years ago, when she was seventeen, just old enough to be of some use to the old woman, she bolted to London with an artist man who was down here and who had used her as a model for several of his pictures. That's the whole of Poppy's story."

"Oh, did he marry her?"

"Hardly. People don't marry the Poppies of this world."

"Poor little soul!" Elizabeth's eyes were meditative. "It must be very difficult to be as beautiful as that—and remain good. Don't you think so?"

"I don't think you need waste a grain of pity over Poppy Ridgway," replied Colin unsympathetically. "She knows very well how to take care of herself. When it suited her to come back to Waincliff, because Maitland wanted her here as a model, she dumped herself down on her grandmother again without the slightest hesitation. The old woman didn't relish it at all. She told Jane the other day that she'd always 'lived respectable' herself, and that it was very hard to be looked down on by the neighbours because Poppy had disgraced the family. One more instance, you see"—with a brief smile—"of the injustices of life."

Elizabeth was silent a moment, recognising the bitter personal note that had sounded in the last phrase. Then she said gently:

"I know what you're thinking of, Colin. But there are compensations——"

"Compensations? . . . Bah!"

"I mean it," she went on seriously. "It's a big compensation to be a musician such as you are."

"Very big," he answered bitterly. "When everything

else—when the one thing in life that matters is denied you."

She looked across at him with startled eyes.

"The one thing?"

He nodded.

"Yes. Some men are free to ask for what they want. I'm not."

"To ask—what?" she repeated doubtfully. She could not understand Colin in this mood.

He got up and limped restlessly across the room and back again.

"To ask any woman to share my life," he said, half savagely. "A maimed man, blessed with the pleasing prospect of growing lamer as he grows older, can't exactly ask a woman to marry him."

A look of sudden comprehension dawned in her eyes. So Colin was in love! She was conscious of a little feminine thrill of interest and excitement.

"Then there is—someone?" she asked.

"Yes, there is," he admitted.

Elizabeth sat up on her couch.

"Oh, Colin, and you're not telling her, not asking her, just because you're a little lame!" she exclaimed. "But how absurd! If she cares, do you suppose that that would make the slightest difference to her?"

He looked down at her curiously.

"Don't you think it would?"

She shook her head.

"I'm sure it wouldn't. I think—I think it's rather cowardly of you not to tell her."

"It would want a whole lot of pluck to do it," he returned grimly. "She'd probably merely consider it a piece of amazing cheek on the part of a lame man,

and turn him down as promptly as he deserved."

Elizabeth answered him out of a deep, instinctive knowledge.

"No woman—no decent woman—ever thinks it's 'cheek' for a man to care for her. Do tell her, Colin."

He was silent for a moment. At last he said slowly:

"Perhaps I will, some day."

And then the entrance of Jane, bringing in some letters which had come by the afternoon post, put an end to the conversation.

But the memory of it remained in Elizabeth's mind. It explained so much to her of Colin's moodiness and sudden fits of irritable unsociability. A day or two later, another aspect of the matter presented itself to her—the question of how it would affect Jane should Colin eventually summon up courage to put his fate to the test and find that, after all, his lameness was not going to debar him from "the one thing in life that matters."

Busy as she was, Jane somehow contrived to spend a good deal of time beside the invalid's couch, chatting with her, and out of these hours had sprung a rare intimacy and understanding which, in ordinary circumstances, could only have been the growth of many months.

It was during one of these talks that Elizabeth came to realise the peculiar tie of affection which bound brother and sister together. Quite simply, one afternoon when they were alone, Jane had confided in her the story of Dick Fenton's death.

"I'd rather you knew," she told her. "You've become so much one of us, now"—smiling at her affectionately.

"I did know before," replied Elizabeth truthfully. "Doctor Jack told me—that afternoon he came here

when you and Colin had gone in to Starranbridge."

"Jack told you?" Jane looked a little doubtful and surprised, and Elizabeth divined that she might easily misunderstand Sutherland's having talked about her affairs, and perhaps resent it.

"Not in any sort of gossipy way," she went on, therefore, hastily. "But, don't you see"—smiling—"you're uppermost in his thoughts all the time and he just can't help talking about you to any one he finds sympathetic."

Jane flushed like an embarrassed schoolgirl.

"I know," she admitted rather helplessly. "And he's such a dear. I do wish he'd think about someone else."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"He won't," she asserted. "I—somehow, I'm sure of that. He isn't the sort of man to fall in love with first one woman and then another. I suppose it *is* no good, Jane—his caring?" she added rather wistfully. These two were both such dears, and now and again she had seen so clearly into the terrible loneliness of Jane's heart that she could not help wishing she would let big, kind Jack Sutherland try to fill it with his love.

"No good at all," replied Jane quietly. "You see" —with a smile that held the unshed tears of years in its quick, sweet bravery—"I'm not the sort of woman to fall in love with first one man and then another, either."

"No," assented Elizabeth. "I suppose one could never —quite—forget."

"Never," said Jane. "And I less than any other woman —with Colin beside me to remind me always of how splendidly Dick died. I think," she went on slowly, "that that's why I'm so frightfully fond of Colin. He

represents what Dick died for. Ever since then, he's meant more to me than any ordinary brother would. My life is just bound up in his. And his is a very broken life. It's up to me to make it as endurable as possible."

The remembrance of her recent conversation with Colin crossed Elizabeth's mind uncomfortably, and impelled her to a question that sounded almost brutal in its crudeness.

"What would you do—if Colin ever married?" she asked. Somehow she felt as though Jane ought to have some warning, some prevision of a possibility that must surely come as a sharp blow to her if it materialised.

Jane regarded her with quiet, contemplative eyes.

"If he married the right woman—a woman he loved and who loved him—I should be awfully glad," she said simply.

She left Elizabeth musing—musing very tenderly and with a little rush of inward awe. It was easy to see that, with the passionate self-abnegation of a woman who loves and pities, Jane had, to all interests and purposes, dedicated herself to her brother's service, investing the relationship between them with a halo of romance and sacrifice. The possibility of seeking some modicum of happiness for herself, while he had need of her, apparently never even presented itself to her.

But then, Jane was rather splendid altogether. She had talked sometimes of Elizabeth's mother, and throughout her simply narrative of the latter part of poor Irene's tempestuous life, it had been apparent how sturdily she had stood by her friend, through good and evil report, and, most marvellous of all in his daughter's eyes,

had managed still to retain Frayne's friendship. For she knew her father well enough—his temperamental pride and the stubborn inflexibility which accompanied it—to realise that Jane had accomplished rather an amazing thing in remaining true to her friendship for Irene without quarrelling irrevocably with him.

Turning the matter over in her own mind the following day, Elizabeth came to the conclusion that Jane must have triumphed by the sheer, transparent honesty and goodness of her nature. She wondered whether in parallel circumstances, if it ever happened that her own and Candy's views should be in hopeless opposition, she would be able to maintain her standpoint without losing that good comradeship and understanding which meant so much to both of them. She was conscious, of a little inner shiver of apprehension, of the kind of feeling you have when you say someone has walked over your grave, and her mind flashed back to that last day in Italy, when, just before the storm broke over the lake, a sudden dread of this journey to England and the consequent separation from Candy had laid hold of her. That queer sense of foreboding was the last thing she remembered before the fury of the gale drove everything out of her mind except the immediate struggle to keep afloat. And now, without rhyme or reason, with the sun shining cheerfully overhead and a blue sea stretching away to meet a cloudless sky, that same feeling of foreboding had overtaken her again, weighing down upon her with a heavy sense of oppression. She stirred restlessly on her couch and turned gladly as the welcome click of the door-handle turning heralded the coming of someone who would keep her company and distract her thoughts—probably Jane or

Colin, as Sutherland had already come and gone soon after lunch.

But it was neither Jane's boyish figure nor her brother's tall, stooping one which the opening door revealed. Elizabeth felt her heart give a sudden leap, then start thudding so loudly in her ears that it almost drowned the sound of Sarah's cheerful voice as she announced:

"Here's another visitor for you, miss—'tis Mr. Maitland this time."

CHAPTER X

THE OTHER SIDE

"OH, I'm so glad to see you!" exclaimed Elizabeth, rather breathlessly, as Maitland shook hands with her. And then, immediately recollecting his chill reception of her former "I'm ever so glad we've met again," she coloured up to the roots of her hair and wished heartily that she had been a little less cordial in her greeting. To cover her confusion she issued a hasty order.

"Tea, please, Sarah. I won't wait for Miss Jane. She said she wouldn't be back till late this afternoon." Then, addressing Maitland a trifle nervously, she continued:

"I'm sorry—both Colin and Jane are out. They've gone into Starranbridge. It's market day, you know, and Jane takes in her butter and eggs to sell."

Maitland looked down at her, and the vivid blueness of the eyes set in his lean, dark face struck her afresh, just as it had done on the occasion of their first meeting. She must have forgotten how blue they were.

"Well, as it was you I came to see, I shan't complain at the absence of 'Jane and Colin,'" he replied, smiling at her in a half-humorous, friendly fashion that suddenly restored her confidence. "How is the sprained ankle?" he added, as he seated himself beside her couch.

He made no apology, offered no explanation, for not having called to inquire during all these long days that

she had been inwardly expecting him. But that didn't seem to matter now. He was here, regarding her with the same quizzical friendliness in his eyes as when he had teased and ordered her about that day at Villa Felice, and all at once she felt that some barrier—she could not precisely define what it was—which had arisen between them had vanished. Maitland was no longer remote and unapproachable, as he had seemed on the day of her accident when he had lunched at Brownleaves, and she found her spirits rising curiously in consequence.

"My ankle?" she replied. "Oh, it's heaps better. I've been allowed to hobble round the room a little since the day before yesterday, and when he was here this afternoon Dr. Jack told me that if I'd take great care and a walking-stick I might go out for a stroll in the garden to-morrow."

"Splendid!" he declared heartily. "You've been rather on my conscience, you know, since it was one of my rabbit holes that was your undoing."

"Have I?" She looked across at him with a faintly mischievous challenge in her eyes. Somehow, with Maitland beside her, all previous soreness and resentment vanished. She felt oddly content and tranquil—a feeling for which there seemed to be no particular explanation. "You haven't exactly *hurried* over to inquire about my welfare, have you?"

"No," he agreed bluntly. "I haven't. I had to—decide—whether I would come at all—or not."

She flushed sensitively.

"'Whether you would come at all'—I don't understand," she said uncertainly. "Didn't you want to come?"

"Oh, yes. I wanted to come. But"—his eyes narrowed

a little—"it isn't always wise to do what one wants in this world."

A transient smile flitted round her lips.

"Do you put making friends with people into the category of unwise things, then?" she asked.

"Certainly I do. When you make a friend you present fate with fresh possibilities of hurting you, and I can see no particular object in voluntarily contributing to the powers of destiny."

She was struck anew by the ingrained cynicism of the man's outlook.

"You have a curious idea of friendship," she said at last, slowly.

"Perhaps I've had a curious experience of it," he replied dryly. "No friendship is worth the name until it has been put to the proof—and when it comes to be tested the result is pretty generally an example of 'every man for himself and the devil take the hindermost.'" He spoke with a kind of arid conviction, as though his opinion were based on the rock of some past happening.

"I should hate to think that!" broke out Elizabeth impetuously, urged by some inner longing to combat a creed whose bitterness she could not understand.

"And I should hate you to," he answered swiftly. "Because, you see," he went on more lightly, as though endeavouring to counteract the sudden tensity with which the last words had left his lips, "when anyone thinks like that it drives them into doing boorish things—such as omitting to inquire after people who get tripped up by rabbit holes."

"I believe," she said accusingly, "you were *afraid* of making friends?"

"I believe I was," he assented gravely.

"And now?" The eternal feminine in her prompted the question and she stole a fugitive glance at him as she uttered it. But she could read nothing from his face. His eyes were impenetrable. Nor did she get any answer to her question, as at that moment Sarah re-entered the room, bringing in tea and a prosaic atmosphere which accorded ill with a discussion upon abstract matters.

"Let me pour out," suggested Maitland, as Sarah arranged the tray on a small table beside the couch. "You're still an invalid, you know."

Smilingly Elizabeth surrendered the heavy silver Queen Anne teapot, and he proceeded to pour out her tea and wait on her every bit as solicitously as Colin himself.

"Are you—what is the word?—'sculpting' anything just now?" she asked presently.

He nodded, his eyes kindling, the artist's enthusiasm roused in him at once.

"Yes. I'm working at an idea I have for a 'Delilah'—Delilah after she has succeeded, with Samson's shorn locks in her hands," he went on descriptively.

"That's rather a new idea, isn't it?" said Elizabeth, with interest.

"Yes, I think it is," he answered simply. "The general notion seems to be to think of her always as planning and scheming for Samson's downfall. My idea is to make her a Delilah triumphant, glorying over what she has accomplished."

"And is Poppy Ridgway the model for this?"

"Oh, yes. I use no other model, practically. She comes of a family of models—at least, on her mother's side. Tom Ridgway married an Italian who had been a very beautiful model. And *her* mother, and father, too, had both been models before her."

"It sounds as if it ran in families," commented Elizabeth.

"So it does," he returned. "Didn't you know that? There are whole families of Italians who are all models —father, mother and children, and sometimes it goes through several generations. . . . And they make the most satisfactory models of all—it's in their blood. They pose wonderfully, hour after hour, with only ten minutes rest between each hour—unless, of course, it happens to be a very difficult pose."

"I suppose Poppy's a very good model, then?"

"Almost too good," he answered ruefully. "If I get absorbed in my work and forget that it's time for a rest, she never reminds me. She'll stick it till she drops sooner than stop me. On one occasion my first awakening to the fact that I'd long overstepped the usual time was when she fainted dead away on the turntable."

"The turntable? What's that?" she inquired curiously.

"A big revolving table on which you pose your model. You see"—smiling—"a sculptor differs from an artist in requiring to view his model from all points of the compass."

"Poppy must be very devoted—either to you or to art."

Maitland laughed.

"I think she has a kind of doglike devotion to me," he said. "You see," he went on explanatorily, "I pulled her —almost literally—out of the gutter, poor little devil. She'd been a model to all and sundry—and a good many other things besides, and she was utterly sick of life when I found her."

"Where did you find her?"

"On Waterloo Bridge—contemplating suicide," he answered grimly.

"Oh!" A little exclamation of horror broke from Elizabeth.

He glanced at her keenly.

"That shocks you, does it?"

"No, but—but suicide always seems to me rather—rather cowardly," she confessed.

A curiously hard look came over his face.

"I know it does to people who've never been right up against life. They can't judge. I understand what Poppy felt like. I've been up against it myself once—*hard*. And I, too, contemplated suicide."

"You?"

He bowed half mockingly.

"Even I. Not *via* Waterloo Bridge, admittedly. I staged my plans for a get-out more artistically than that. But no man ever tried harder to get quit of this world than I did. Only Death refused me."

Elizabeth was silent. Her pulses beat unsteadily. She felt shaken—shaken to the depths of her at the realisation that this man whom fate had thrust so curiously into her life, who occupied a much bigger place in her thoughts than she was actually aware of, had once been so desperately miserable that death had seemed the only way out. It was horrible to think that people could be so unhappy as that. And then—*Private Smithers!* The name flashed into her mind like the keyword of a puzzle. Sutherland had told them how he had known Maitland during the war under the name of Private Smithers. She could guess the rest. That, then, was how he had sought a way out of life, sought it eagerly on those fields of death in Flanders. And Death had passed him by—would have none of him—and had taken instead others who longed to live.

"I'm—I'm glad," she said, with a childish quiver in her voice. "I'm glad you didn't succeed."

For an instant his eyes swept her face. Then he looked out of the window where the light of the westering sun lay dappled softly over the garden.

"I'm glad, too, now," he said. "Don't you remember my telling you once that you can win through anything if you want to, and come out on the other side? Well, in time I came out, and now Poppy's done the same. Nowadays she sits for me almost exclusively; it's quite a concession on her part if she poses for anyone else. So, of course, everyone tries to get hold of her and she's become rather famous as a model. Before, she was just a bit of life's flotsam and jetsam, tossed from one to another. But she's somebody now, in her own little way—not just at anybody's beck and call. And I can imagine exactly how she feels. You see, I, too, happen to know what it's like to be nobody—less than nobody, in fact," he amended with sudden harshness, "and afterwards to become somebody. It has its own thrill—a certain dogged satisfaction in having got the better of fate."

"But I don't see how you could ever have been—nobody," objected Elizabeth wonderingly.

"Probably you don't. Nevertheless, it was the case at one time." He spoke rather brusquely and she fell silent, feeling a little snubbed. It was as though he regretted having said so much and thought that she was prying inquisitively into what he had left unsaid. The bare thought of such a thing made her cheeks burn. She felt hot all over. As if he sensed her discomfort and wanted to put her at her ease, he began speaking again, choosing a totally fresh topic.

"I suppose, as soon as your ankle is all right, you will

be coming out hunting? The opening meet is fixed for about a fortnight ahead, I hear. You do ride, don't you?" —with a quick, comprehensive glance that took in the slender, racing lines of her figure.

She nodded.

"Oh, yes, I ride," she answered. "But I've never hunted in my life. Candy—that's my father—will hunt when he comes back, and of course I shall, too, then. We always do everything together. But until he comes I've nothing to ride, as I'm afraid I don't quite see Jane letting me imperil one of her precious ponies!" she wound up with a smile.

Maitland smiled, too.

"No, I don't see her doing that, either," he agreed. "But I've several decent hunters stabled at Lone Edge. I wonder if you'd let me give you a mount?"

There was a touch of almost boyish shyness and appeal about him as he made his proposal which seemed to Elizabeth quite incompatible with this man whom she had hitherto chiefly known as ruthlessly dominating, his speech invested with a certain half mocking, half cynical quality that was like the hard brilliancy of steel. She felt as though she had been vouchsafed a glimpse of him as he might have been years ago, before the happenings of life had set their seal so visibly upon him.

"It's very kind of you," she said frankly. "But even if I'd a horse to ride I couldn't very well go hunting until Candy comes back to take me out. I'm absolutely inexperienced, you see—and Colin doesn't ride, of course."

"I'd take charge of you," suggested Maitland, "if you'd let me. And the chestnut mare I want you to try never puts a foot wrong. She knows the game of hunting better than most men. What do you say?"

Elizabeth's eyes sparkled with delight.

"What do you expect me to say—except to thank you terribly much? I can't tell you how I'd love it—especially after being cooped up on this couch for so long! And it will be such fun," she went on gleefully, "when Candy comes home, expecting to put me into the ways of hunting, for him to find I know all the ropes as well as he does!"

"What a child you are!" he said teasingly.

But there was an unwonted softness in the keen blue eyes as they rested on the girl's eager young face—a look which no woman had succeeded in calling into Blair Maitland's eyes since one moonlight night, eleven years ago, when his whole world of faith and love and belief had suddenly crashed about him and he had gone down into utter darkness.

Presently Sarah came in to light the lamps—Brownleaves was not sufficiently modernised to boast electric light—and soon afterwards the throb of an engine announced the return of Jane and Colin from Starranbridge market. The latter greeted Maitland rather coolly and excused himself almost at once on the plea of seeing to some small detail in connection with the car, but Jane, as usual, radiated friendliness.

"I'm so glad you came and kept our invalid company," she said pleasantly. "I was afraid she'd feel lonely with both of us away all day."

"Then Miss Frayne and I have conferred a mutual benefit on each other," returned Maitland. "Lone Edge quite lives up to its name in the way of solitude, you know."

"But I thought—everyone understood that you took it for that reason," submitted Jane, with some surprise. "There's a general idea prevalent in the neighbourhood

that nothing would be so unwelcome at Lone Edge as a visitor."

A glint of humour showed itself in his eyes.

"Come and see," he suggested. "I'll acknowledge that I did take the place partly because its aloof situation rather appealed to me. But"—almost unconsciously his glance rested on the slight figure lying on the couch—"I've learnt the error of my ways since then."

"In that case, then, Elizabeth and I will invade you one day. I've always wanted to see the interior of Lone Edge. It's the most romantic-looking place. Only, don't you feel as if you might drop over the edge of the cliff into the sea at any old moment? Or perhaps it isn't really built as close to the edge as it appears?"

"Yes, it is. There are only a few yards between the front of the house and the actual edge. But fix a day to come over and see it for yourselves."

Elizabeth nodded up at him.

"Very well, we'll fix it for as soon as Doctor Jack will let me go. And perhaps, then," with a smile, "I can have a peep into the stables at the same time."

Jane glanced across at her inquiringly, and she explained matters by telling her of Maitland's offer of a mount.

"How kind of you!" Jane turned to the visitor with genuine pleasure in her voice. "But you'll take great care of her, won't you? We mustn't welcome her father back with the news of a broken leg or something of that kind!"

"I'll take great care of her," said Maitland.

And somehow, after he had gone, those six quietly uttered words lingered oddly in Elizabeth's memory. They seemed to hold something deeper and more vital than just their obvious answer to Jane's question.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE STUDIO

"THERE, you can take a rest now, Poppy."

As he spoke, Maitland stepped back from the three-legged modelling stand upon which his "Delilah" rested and regarded his handiwork with critical eyes. It was a small and rather wonderful figure in clay which was silhouetted against the shadowy background of the big studio—that of a woman, bending slightly forward. Between her hands, strained a little apart as though she were almost tearing the shorn locks asunder, she held a mane of hair, and, beautiful as were the hands themselves, the fingers which clutched at the tresses contained a rather horrible claw-like suggestion, like the hands of a miser clutching at gold. The woman's face, bent above the handful of cropped hair, was smiling, a smile of half savage triumph tinged with a faint contempt, as though even while she triumphed she scorned the man who had let her beguile him of his strength so easily. It was a vital piece of work, the poise of the woman's figure, with the body half turning from the waist and the heels barely touching the ground, somehow conveying the impression that she was swaying to and fro in an ecstasy of delight. You could almost imagine her crooning to herself in her soft, round throat, as a tiger purrs over his prey.

Poppy sprang lightly down from the turntable.

"May I come and look?" she said.

Still engrossed in his own mental appraisement of his

morning's work, Blair nodded absently, and she came quickly to his side, and stood looking at the figure with an odd expression in her topaz-golden eyes.

"My! You do think women are bad, don't you?" she said suddenly.

The abrupt query brought him out of his absorption.

"Yes," he replied quietly. "The Delilah type of woman, certainly. Only, in real life, she doesn't show it quite as obviously as that"—with a gesture towards the clay figure.

"What do you mean by the Delilah type of woman?" asked Poppy curiously. The circumstances which had brought these two together had given Maitland a peculiar sense of freedom in her company. He was always perfectly natural with her and spoke his thoughts out almost as frankly as if he were alone. Very often he talked somewhat over her head, but she was quite used to this, and accustomed to delve for his meaning by dint of pertinent questioning. He turned now, and looked at her consideringly.

"What do I mean by the Delilah type? Well, perhaps I include a little more than most men. Delilah, to my mind, is the sort of woman who, by trading on her sex, robs a man of his happiness, his love, his honour—of anything that happens to suit her need of the moment. A woman who doesn't play the game, in fact."

Poppy pondered this in silence for a few minutes, her lovely brows puckered together in puzzled thought.

"Well," she burst out at last, "if it's playing fair that counts, there are quite as many Mr. Delilahs! Men don't play fair with women—not by a long chalk they don't."

Her eyes had grown suddenly dark with a brooding resentment, and Maitland's glance softened to a queer

half-tender kindliness as they rested on the beautiful child face.

"No, Poppy, they don't always," he agreed. "But some of us have a good try at it."

She made an impulsive snatch at his hand and pressed her young red lips passionately against it.

"You do!" she exclaimed fervently. "I know that. But then you're *you*. There's no one in the world like you."

He drew his hand away and ruffled up her hair with a careless brotherly caress.

"Don't talk nonsense, my child," he said. "You had a bad experience, that's all. We most of us get it in the neck, one time or another. But it does you in rather badly if you're only a youngster when it happens," he added with the sudden sharpness of recollection. "Now"—he squared his shoulders as though throwing off a burden—"help me put the studio to rights."

"You finished work for the day?" she asked with surprise.

He nodded gaily.

"Yes, I'm giving a tea-party to two ladies, and as they're sure to want to see the studio we must make it look a bit shipshape."

Poppy glanced at him shrewdly from under her long lashes.

"I s'pose one of them's that Miss Frayne?" she said slowly.

"Clever child. One of them *is* Miss Frayne." As he spoke, Maitland sprayed the Delilah lightly over with water to keep the clay moist until he came to work on it again, then proceeded to envelope her in damp cloths, so arranged that their weight should not rest on the figure

itself and thus blur a single detail of the delicate modelling. Then, over all, he hung a covering of American cloth in order to prevent the moisture from drying off.

"You've been hunting with Miss Frayne, haven't you?" observed Poppy presently. "I saw you last Thursday."

"Yes. We've been out with hounds several times. Were you following on foot, then?" He spoke mechanically, preoccupied with some pencil sketches he was sorting out.

"No. I only went to the meet." She did not add that, hidden behind a hedge, she had knelt upon the damp earth for twenty minutes or more, peering between the stems of the bushy growth which topped it, in order to experience the secret joy of seeing Maitland on horseback —a joy that was tinctured with a sharp tang of bitterness, however, when she discovered that Elizabeth was his companion.

Nevertheless, she had not been able to tear herself away until hounds and horses had finally trotted out of sight, bent on the day's sport, but had remained where she was up to the last moment, staring through the branches with big, tortured eyes at the man who, since he had come into her life, had won the utter devotion of her wild, undisciplined nature. She had fought him like a little wild-cat on the occasion when he had forcibly restrained her from taking her own life. His wrist still bore a small curved scar where her white teeth had bitten into the flesh as she struggled with him. But gradually he had given her back her self-respect, taught her the sanctity and loveliness of her own body, and bestowed on her the freedom born of payment for work—and for work only.

And now, as she watched him putting the studio to rights—for the benefit of this other woman, selecting

certain sketches—for the same woman's edification, her eyes grew sombre and veiled, like the eyes of a wounded deer. When, finally, he quitted the studio, telling her that she could consider herself free for the afternoon, she made no answer beyond a jerky movement of assent, and after he had gone she stood looking round her in a curious, bewildered way.

The studio—big, bare, barn-like place that it was—symbolised her whole world. Her work as a model, and Maitland. To Poppy that comprised the entire meaning of life. And now another woman was to be let into it. Somehow she felt that after Elizabeth had been there, it would never be the same again. Always, afterwards, the studio would hold the distillation of another presence in its atmosphere, the echo of another voice, the light tread of strange feet. It was like a spiritual trespass.

Suddenly she espied Blair's working overall, carelessly flung down on a seat just as he had stripped it off when he had finished modelling. With a little choked cry she sprang towards it and, picking it up, crushed it in her arms, holding it tightly against her young breast. It was clammy in patches, where daubs of moist clay still adhered to it, and smelt familiarly of mingled clay and tobacco. Poppy bent her head over it, lower, lower still, till her cheek touched it. She could feel the coarse texture of the material rough against her skin. A stifled little sound like that of an animal in pain broke from her. . . .

After a long time she lifted her head and shook out the overall so that it hung straitly from her hand. A few particles of old dried clay flew from it and pattered on the floor. Then, very meticulously, she began to fold it up with deft, smoothing fingers, and, when this was accomplished, laid it away on the shelf where it belonged.

As she turned from the shelf, she caught the sound of voices and footsteps from the drive outside drifting in through the window, opened at the top. Like a flash she crossed the studio and was pressing up against the window-frame, peering out with dilated eyes. Yes, those were the footsteps that would henceforth haunt the studio for her. She knew she would always hear them there after to-day. She looked round the big, gaunt building once again almost as though taking farewell. Then she walked quickly over to the door, which gave entrance into the garden, opened it and fled across the lawns, into the fields beyond, and so out on to the wide lonely spaces of the downs.

CHAPTER XII

A WARNING NOTE

JANE and Elizabeth had walked over to Lone Edge from Brownleaves, and now, when they arrived at the house, they found Maitland on the door-step, waiting to welcome them.

"At last!" he exclaimed, as they shook hands. "I was beginning to think you were never going to pay your long-promised visit here."

"I'm afraid it's my fault," acknowledged Jane. "You see"—smiling—"I'm a working woman, and what with looking after my poultry and the dairy, and exercising those lively young ponies of mine, I've very little time left for being sociable."

"Why don't you hunt the ponies sometimes?" suggested Maitland, as he led the way indoors. "That would soon take some of the steam out of them."

"It would. But the only one that's thoroughly broken to saddle just now is a rather excitable young mare, and I'm afraid hunting might make her pull a bit. And that would spoil her mouth for polo. . . . What a charming room!" She broke off with a spontaneous exclamation of delight, as her eyes absorbed the mellow harmony of panelled walls, rich rose and blue of Persian rugs breaking the sombre darkness of a polished oaken floor, casement windows whose leaded diamond panes twinkled in the bright October sunlight, and a high, old-fashioned

chimneypiece, whence pewter plates and mugs gleamed dimly down like veiled ghosts of silver.

"Yes. I wasn't introduced to this room on my first visit here," observed Elizabeth, with an accusing smile at Maitland. "But I suppose trespassers can't be choosers."

"You like the room?" he said quickly. His voice held a certain eagerness, as though her opinion mattered a good deal to him.

"*Like* it! If the rest of the house is like this, Lone Edge is the most 'desirable freehold residence' I've ever come across," she replied, laughing.

"But how does the place manage to look so old, seeing that it was only built ten or twelve years ago?" asked Jane, later on, when tea had been brought in.

"Well, the original owner must have spent a small fortune over it," returned Maitland. "It *is* all old, intrinsically. I made inquiries, and found that the very stones of which the house is built are from the ruins of an old, tumble-down castle, and this Jacobean panelling"—rapping on it lightly with his hand—"and the oak floor speak for themselves. The only modern thing in the whole place—I mean, composed of modern material—is that outside building which I use as a studio. The rest of the house might just as well have been here from time immemorial."

"I remember, years ago, at the time it was being built, hearing what we all thought then were fantastic stories about the stones of an old Scottish ruin being used for it," said Jane. "And we never knew the truth, because no one was ever allowed inside. Even when the place was empty the caretaker wouldn't allow anyone in—he said he was forbidden to."

"I know." Maitland nodded. "The late owner left

an eccentric will to that effect, and he also attached a condition to the ultimate disposal of the property which was enough to choke off any ordinary purchaser. I think he must have been so obsessed with the idea of keeping people out while he was alive and lived here that it gave him a certain grim satisfaction to reflect that he'd done his best to keep them out even after he was dead! Practically, I had to decide to take the place on its description only. At least, I had to put down a hundred pounds before I was allowed to go over it, with the understanding that the money was forfeit if I decided not to buy the property after inspecting it."

"You must have some of the gambler's spirit in you to have done that," remarked Jane, smiling.

"Well, I think the whole thing rather intrigued me," replied Maitland. "And then there were two quite definite points which influenced me—the unusual situation of the place, right on the edge of the cliff, and the thought of using that big out-building as a studio."

"We're going to be allowed to see the studio, presently, aren't we?" put in Elizabeth quickly.

"Of course, if you'd like to. We'll go when you and Miss Wentworth have had your tea."

Maitland had hardly finished speaking when the door opened and Morris ushered in a visitor.

"Dr. Sutherland," he announced, and retired, leaving Doctor Jack standing looking from one to another of the trio in the room with a comical mixture of embarrassment and pleasure in his face as he perceived who the visitors were.

"I say!" he exclaimed ruefully, shaking hands with his host. "I seem to have butted in on a tea-party. I'm awfully sorry. I was passing this way and just thought

I'd look in on you—didn't know you had guests—better be off——"

He turned as though to beat a hasty retreat when Maitland laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Don't look as if you'd interrupted a private *séance* of some kind!" he said, laughter in his eyes. "Sit down, man, and join the 'party.' "

"May I?" said Doctor Jack, hesitating, as he shook hands with the two women.

"Of course you may. Have some tea. I'll ring for another cup."

He suited the action to the word, and, as he turned back and began chatting in a friendly sort of fashion with Sutherland, Elizabeth found herself trying to readjust certain ideas she had formed, one of which had been that for some reason or other Maitland did not particularly care for the doctor. Hitherto, he had always appeared inclined, whenever possible, to avoid meeting him, and had sometimes fallen oddly silent at the chance mention of his name. Now, however, it seemed as if he had overcome any aversion he had felt towards him. At any rate, it no longer showed itself in his manner.

When tea was over Jane reminded Maitland of his promise to show them the studio, and they all adjourned thither, reaching it by way of a covered-in passage which led to it from the house.

"You've plenty of room here, anyway," remarked Sutherland, as he strolled round, looking at the various casts of heads and feet, figures in plaster, studies and sketches which found place there. "What's that?" he asked, pointing to a big wooden bin.

Maitland lifted the lid, revealing the zinc-lined interior.

"That's where I keep my clay," he explained, pointing

to the mass of moist greyish substance which it contained. "Over there"—he indicated a wide stone slab which held a heterogeneous collection of broken pieces of dry clay, many of them still recognisable as the legs or arms of tentative studies that had been destroyed—"over there are all old, dried pieces, waiting to be wetted and worked up again ready for use."

"Looks rather like a selection from the valley of dry bones," commented Sutherland, smiling. "It's all new to me, you know," he added. "This is my first visit to a sculptor's studio, and I'm always interested in other fellows' jobs. So you must forgive my curiosity and not mind my prowling round like a cat in a larder."

"Prowl round as much as you like," answered Maitland readily. "I'm afraid there isn't very much for you to see. My bigger groups are still in my London studio."

Meanwhile Elizabeth was standing alone in front of the "Delilah." She was so much absorbed in it that she started a little when she found that Maitland had left Jane and Sutherland to their own devices at the other end of the big studio and was standing beside her.

"Do you like it?" he asked, a quizzical note in his voice.

"'Like' isn't quite the word," she answered soberly. "It's very beautiful . . . and rather horrible. It fascinates one."

"That, surely, was Delilah's prerogative."

She was silent for a moment. Then, her eyes still fixed upon the figure in front of her, she asked hesitatingly:

"Have you ever known—a Delilah?"

"Yes. And paid heavily for the privilege." He paused a moment, then went on rapidly: "That was why I didn't

come to see you when you had hurt your foot. . . . I was afraid to."

"Afraid?" Elizabeth's gaze left the modelled figure and sought the face of the man beside her. She found him staring down at her with an odd intensity—an intensity that compelled her to drop her own eyes hastily, conscious of a sudden breathless sense of trepidation.

"Yes, afraid," he repeated deliberately. "I'd never meant to trust a woman again. I cut that sort of thing out of my life eleven years ago. But I knew from the very first—that day on Lake Como—that if I were to see much of you, I should trust you blindly——"

At this moment steps and voices sounded from the far end of the studio, as Jane and Sutherland emerged from the further side of some scaffolding erected around a big modelling stand designed to hold any very large piece of work. Elizabeth, with suddenly flushed cheeks, focused her attention hastily on the "Delilah." She heard Maitland give a low, amused laugh, half under his breath. Then, turning composedly to the others as they came up, he suggested a visit to the stables. Half an hour slid easily away in inspecting the horses and a newly arrived family of spaniel puppies, and then, with a glance at her wrist-watch, Jane declared it was time to be going home.

"You must see the front of the house first, where it almost overhangs the cliff," submitted Maitland. "That's one of the chief features of the place, you know."

Jane yielded.

"Very well," she said. "But after that, I really must go," she added to Sutherland, as they all strolled on together, Maitland and Elizabeth leading the way. "Ponies to feed, milk to scald—I must certainly be off."

"Can't Colin deputise, then?" inquired Doctor Jack.

"He might feed the ponies, perhaps," she answered, smiling, "but I think Sarah would make a much better substitute as regards the dairy work! Besides, I prefer to do everything for myself."

"I know that"—significantly. "I wish to God you'd get over the idea, and let other people who want to do things for you and take care of you——"

"That's forbidden ground," she interrupted, shaking her head reprovingly. "Dear Wise Man, do let me be foolish and obstinate and tiresome in my own way. I'm too old to go anyone else's way, now."

"Too old!" he exclaimed explosively. "If *that's* the only reason——"

She checked him with a swift hand on his arm and honest brown eyes that met his own entreatingly.

"But it isn't—you know that, Jack, dear. . . . And now let's talk of something else. This is rather a wonderful place of Mr. Maitland's, don't you think?" she went on quickly. "We haven't half explored it all yet. I believe from that turret"—pointing to a squarish tower which crowned one wing of the house—"you get a magnificent view of the sea and coastline. Why don't you and Elizabeth stay a little longer? You haven't got any hungry ponies on your conscience."

"No, but I've got surgery hour at six o'clock," replied Sutherland grimly. "Besides, I'm going to see you home. I wonder," he went on reflectively, "whether Frayne will quite approve of that friendship?" He nodded towards Maitland and Elizabeth, who were now some little distance ahead.

Jane's glance, following the direction indicated, grew a shade wistful. She had seen, more than once, a look in Colin's eyes which had betrayed his secret, and she

wondered rather sadly if this friendship of which Sutherland was speaking were going to snatch from her adored brother the possibility of one great happiness in his life—a happiness that might make up to him for all he had lost.

"I don't see why Candy should disapprove," she returned in answer to the doctor's question.

"Don't you?"

Jane paused in the middle of the path they were traversing, a sudden anxiety in her eyes. There had been something that sounded almost like a note of warning in the brief question.

"Do you? Is there any reason why he should?"

Sutherland kicked a small pebble rather irritably to one side.

"Well, we know the man was a private in the army—under quite a different name from the one he now bears. And one naturally asks—why? At least, Candy will."

"I thought he had come into money since then," suggested Jane hopefully, "and had to change his name? That happens sometimes."

"Perhaps. But he's a queer cuss—shuts up suddenly when you're talking, as if he had something to hide. He never refers to his 'Smithers' days, you notice. . . . And there are some things which no amount of money can alter. Don't you think you might give young Elizabeth a hint?"

"Jack, I never thought you were a snob before! *You'd* probably not want to talk about it if you'd had 'Smithers days' at one time."

A curious expression crossed Sutherland's face.

"No," he said with decision. "You're right there—I shouldn't."

By this time they had drawn level with the house, and,

rounding a corner, they emerged on to a narrow, low-walled terrace, poised above a sheer drop of cliff. Below, a tiny creek curved inwards—a miniature bay cleft in the grim face of Wain Scar, whose rippled golden sand at low tide had earned it the name of Sandy Cove. Just now the tide was high and the waves were booming a dull, rhythmic thunder against its rocky sides.

"Isn't there a place hereabouts called the Devil's Kettle?" asked Sutherland, as they came up with the others. He peered curiously over the wall.

Maitland nodded.

"Yes. There's a round hole in the rock through which the water pours at high tide just as if it were coming out of a kettle-spout. It must get into the cliff through the roof of one of the caves when they're filled, I should think, and then be forced out by the pressure of the rising tide."

"I can't see a hole of any kind," said Jane, craning her neck in a fruitless endeavour to obtain a better view.

"No, you couldn't from where you're standing," explained Maitland. "But there's a ledge juts out from the cliff—away below there, to your right—from which you can get a good view of it."

He pointed towards some rough, uneven steps cut in the sloping surface of the cliff and leading down to a wedge-shaped shelf of rock that jutted out some distance below, overhanging the sea at a dizzy angle. Both steps and ledge were protected by a light hand-rail that looked altogether too slender to be of much actual support.

"Would you care to go down?" he asked.

Jane shook her head and instinctively clutched at the coping of the wall against which she was leaning.

"Not for anything in the wide world!" she declared

emphatically. "I've no head for heights. I should be at the bottom of that cliff long before I'd got half-way down."

Maitland laughed and turned back to Elizabeth, who was standing a few paces away, absorbed in her own thoughts and gazing seaward.

"Will you come?" he said. She started a little at the sound of his voice so close beside her. "I'll promise you shan't fall, if you'll trust yourself to me," he added quietly.

As he spoke, his eyes fixed themselves on hers with a curious intentness, and it seemed to her as though on her answer to his query there hung something of deeper import than its merely surface meaning. Instinctively she knew that he was asking for her trust, not just over this one small matter alone, but in all things—for her trust, and something more as well. For an instant her white lids fell, then with an effort she lifted them and met once more the queer, compelling gaze of those blue eyes with the clear candour of her own.

"Yes, I'll trust you," she said simply.

"Good." He rejoined Jane and Sutherland, and a moment later she heard Jane's voice replying to whatever it was he had said to her.

"Why, of course, if she wants to, the venturesome infant! But, for goodness sake, take care of her, Mr. Maitland. As for me, I really must be going. Jack"—she turned to the doctor—"suppose you wait and bring Elizabeth home?"

"I'll see her home," interjected Maitland swiftly.

The faintest pause followed, just one of those tiny uncomfortable instants when some disturbing thought flashes between two people and is recognised by each.

Sutherland's usually kindly eyes held an oddly dubious expression as they encountered Jane's.

"Very well," he said briefly. "Let's get going, then."

A minute or two later, having made their farewells, he and Jane were swinging briskly down the drive.

CHAPTER XIII

LOVE'S ROSARY

ELIZABETH, with Maitland preceding her, picked her way gingerly down the rough, uneven steps cut into the cliff, steps which the rains of years had polished to a dangerous state of slipperiness. Once she stumbled and felt her feet sliding helplessly from under her, but in an instant his hand had gripped her arm, steadying her.

"Don't be afraid," he said reassuringly, as he caught the sharp sibilance of her indrawn breath. "Take hold of my hand."

His fingers closed firmly round hers, and with their touch all fear seemed to leave her, and she went forward, following him step by step down that hazardous stairway, confident that no harm would come to her, until at last they gained its foot and found themselves on a ledge of rock which jutted boldly out from the cliff itself. Below them, on the farther side of the little bay, the Devil's Kettle was now easily visible, a thin stream of water bubbling and spouting out furiously from a small circular hole in the face of the rock. But for the moment Elizabeth was too enthralled by the beauty of the whole scene which revealed itself to pay any particular attention to it.

The ledge on which she stood was considerably wider than appeared from above, and feeling herself once more upon secure ground, she gazed around her with a curious sense of wonder, almost of elation. There was a queer,

inexplicable thrill in standing there, half-way betwixt earth and heaven, as it were, with only the grey-blue arch of the sky overhead and below the restless water beating ceaselessly against the base of the headland. She felt as though she had been suddenly caught away from the everyday world she knew into the solitudes of God—awed by the immensity of lonely space which seemed to ring her round.

"It's very wonderful," she said at last, in a low, hushed tone.

"Yes, it's very wonderful."

Something in Maitland's voice as he answered crashed through the feeling of solitude which had enveloped her, and she became, all at once, vibrantly aware of his proximity, conscious that they were alone together—utterly and wonderfully alone. A sense of tumult invaded her, and on a nervous impulse she made a hasty step forward and bent over, peering down at the foam of water spurting out from the Devil's Kettle. Suddenly she swayed—uttered a cry.

"God!" The word jerked hoarsely from Maitland's lips as she reeled.

In the same moment she felt his arms close round her like a vice and she was lifted into safety. But he did not release her then. Instead, he held her strongly against his breast, and beneath her cheek she could feel the thud of his heart. She looked up and for a breathless instant met his eyes—demanding, passionate, like blue flame above her. The next, he was kissing her with the fierce possessiveness of a man who has held his passion under rigid restraint so long that when at last the leash has snapped it is almost overwhelming. But she felt no fear—there is no fear in love, and she knew now. with a

sudden deathless certainty, that she loved Blair Maitland as a women only ever loves one man in her life. Her soft lips moved under his, kissing him back with an answering passion that told him her surrender was complete.

"Elizabeth! . . . Beloved!" His voice was unsteady, shaken. "Say you care—tell me you love me. . . ."

She lifted her head from his breast, drawing herself slowly out of his embrace, and the corners of her mouth upturned in a tender, mystic little smile that seemed to chide the question.

"Blair——" His name, coming from her lips for the first time, held an indescribable sweetness. "Blair—oh, my dear, do you need to ask? Don't you *know?*"

He caught her back into his arms, gathering her close against his heart, kissing her imperiously on eyes and throat and lips as though he would never let her go.

"God! If you ever failed me!" he muttered.

She leaned a little away from him.

"If I ever failed you?" she repeated wonderingly. "But how could I? I love you."

"Beloved—forgive me! . . . I spoke out of the past. Once, when I was very young, a woman let me down, and through her I learnt distrust of all women."

"Not of me?"—quickly.

He looked down into the grey eyes, clear and honest as a child's, upraised to his and shook his head.

"No, never of you. That's just it—what I struggled against—that I couldn't help believing in you."

"I'm so glad," she said happily. "Glad that you couldn't help it, I mean."

They were silent a moment, the thoughts of both straying back into a past of which the one knew to the utter-

most dregs the full bitterness, about which the other could only vaguely guess and wonder.

Elizabeth fingered the lapel of his coat.

"Did you—care for her very much?" she asked, at last, rather tremulously. "For the woman who—let you down?"

He answered her with a swift and tender understanding.

"What I felt for her wasn't love as you and I understand it, sweetheart. It was just a headlong boyish passion for an extremely pretty girl whom I had endowed with all the qualities of my ideal woman—a passion which, perhaps, might have grown and deepened into love if nothing had happened to tear the scales from my eyes. But something did happen, and I found that the woman I thought I loved simply didn't exist. My ideals came tumbling down in a heap. . . . That cured me of my faith in women—until I met you."

"And now?" she said softly.

"Now?—Let the dead past bury its dead. There was a time when I didn't believe that possible. People aren't too ready to let the past be finally interred." A touch of the old familiar bitterness sounded in his voice. "They'd ever so much rather dig it up and tear at it like dogs over a bone. A clean cut is the only way out, and I made it. Otherwise——"

"Otherwise?" she prompted.

He looked down at her with a smile, half humorous, half tender.

"Otherwise I should have had to school myself into disbelieving in you—or pretending to—however difficult it might have been."

She turned to him with a sudden passionate little gesture of self-abandonment.

"No, no, never that! The past doesn't matter—not to us, not to you and me. Don't you remember, once, how you told me one could win through anything and come out on the other side? Well, you've won through. Whatever happened in the past is over. You're never going to be hurt again."

He folded her closely in his arms, and there was something far deeper than mere passion in his voice as he answered her.

"Belovedest, nothing in this world or the next can ever hurt me while I have your love."

She clung to him, and there was a tender shining in the eyes she lifted to his face.

"Then you're very, very safe, my Blair. For I love you now—and always."

It is astonishing how completely oblivious concerning time and temperature a pair of lovers can remain. When Blair and Elizabeth finally came back to a sense of things mundane it was to find that the sun had dropped low in the skies, while a chill little evening breeze was ruffling the surface of the sea.

"Jane will be wondering what on earth has happened to me," said Elizabeth, conscience-strickenly, as after a somewhat hazardous scramble they emerged on the top of the cliff once more.

"Well, you can tell her," suggested Maitland, smiling. "Are you tired? Would you like the car—or shall we walk back? It's a lovely evening," he added persuasively.

"Let's walk," she answered, glad in her heart of any excuse to postpone the inevitable moment of parting.

So they strolled slowly homeward, and no one need grudge them the unspoiled sweetness of that added hour together. It only comes once in a lifetime, that perfect and tender aftermath of love's avowal, when at last all barriers are down, and the secret hopes and fears that have tortured the hearts of both man and woman are merged for a brief space into the supreme rapture of love given and returned—untouched by any shadow of doubt or turning.

Long afterwards, when darkness had closed down upon her and the stern path of Duty, jagged and rough, was all that seemed to lie ahead, Elizabeth was to remember that golden hour—treasure it as one treasures a single exquisite bead garnered from a broken and scattered rosary.

Even the road home seemed indefinably changed, invested with a new charm of its own, the village, as they passed through it, more picturesque than usual, and to Elizabeth, whose own inner happiness overflowed in smiles to this one and that whom she knew, the very villagers wore a different air, as though the world went well with them. She didn't realise that hope and joy are as contagious as sadness and depression, and that when you yourself are radiating happiness, those you meet are almost bound to catch some gleams of reflected glory and give them back to you.

But from one person whom they met Elizabeth's joyous young face called forth no answering smile. Poppy, hatless, her short-cropped chestnut mane blown by the winds that had rushed across the downs, encountered the lovers on her way home to the grocery shop at the top of the street. She stopped jerkily and stared at them with the wild, suspicious eyes of a young animal. Her face

was very white, her lips like a vivid crimson flower set in its pallor.

"Why, Poppy," began Elizabeth, smiling and holding out her hand in a friendly fashion.

But the girl did not seem to see the outstretched hand. Her glance had swept over Elizabeth's face and fastened hungrily on that of the man beside her—a tense, searching glance, as though she strove to wrest from him the inmost secret of his thoughts. Then, with a muttered "Good evening," she hurried past them and was lost to sight in the gathering dusk.

"Will you come in?" asked Elizabeth, as she and Blair paused at the gate of Brownleaves.

"Not to-night. I'll see you up the drive and then I'll leave you to tell Jane what has 'happened' "—with a brief, reminiscent smile.

Elizabeth gave a small gurgle of laughter.

"Oh, Jane will probably be charmed at our news. The person who'll not be so pleased is——"

"Colin," interjected Maitland sharply.

"Colin?" She regarded him with wide eyes in which surprise blended with amusement. "Oh, no, I didn't mean Colin. Colin has a lady-love of his own—only he hasn't dared to tell her so yet. No, I was thinking of Candy—of my father. He regards me as his own special private property, you know—a kind of landmark not to be removed! I expect he'll want us to have an engagement about seven years long—with matrimony dangling somewhere on a dim and distant horizon."

"Then I'm afraid he's doomed to disappointment," replied Blair cheerfully. "The days of Jacob are past. Personally, I should like to be married in seven days.

You couldn't manage it, I suppose, just to oblige?" he added teasingly.

"Dear man"—she tucked her hand into his arm with a charming little gesture of "belonging." "Dear man, you must be prepared for a tussle with Candy if you really don't want to emulate Jacob. You'd better make friends with my stepmother," she went on with an irresistible flash of mirth. "She'll be quite your strongest ally as regards a speedy wedding."

"Why? Don't you get on together?"

"Of course we get on together. But equally of course she doesn't want to share her husband with a stepdaughter. No normal woman would. I should positively hate it if you had a daughter or anything tacked on to you! . . . By the way," she continued, "you've never mentioned having *any* relations—never once since I knew you. Don't you possess any?"

The kindly twilight hid from her the hardness which leaped immediately into his eyes and the quick compression of the mouth provoked by her inquiry.

"None," he said briefly.

"Oh, well, that's all right," returned Elizabeth comfortably. "Candy always calls relations nature's handicap," she added, smiling.

"And he's not far wrong," answered Blair. "They certainly don't often prove a very present help in time of trouble."

But now they had approached very nearly to the house, and, sheltered from observation by the final curve of the drive, he took her in his arms.

"I hate saying good night," he said, a sudden roughness in his voice. "Now that you're mine—mine body and soul, just as I'm yours body and soul. Oh, sweetest!

——" And once more the storm of his passion caught them up and they strained against each other, mouth to mouth, shaken to the depths of their being by the resistless pulse of the love which clamoured within them.

At last he released her, slowly, reluctantly, and as she drew away from him she swayed a little, her slight young body tremulous with the swift, surrendering response his passion had awakened .

He swept her up into his arms again, almost crushing her in the fierce possession of his grip.

"My woman—my woman out of all the world!" he said hoarsely. "Nothing—no one shall ever take you from me. I swear it!"

She shook her head, and he felt the satin softness of her hair against his cheek.

"No one ever will," she answered. "Because—oh, my Blair, I shouldn't go."

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAME DOG

THE front door at Brownleaves closed with a cheerful bang that made itself heard emphatically in the sitting-room. At the sound of it, Colin, who had been standing staring fixedly down into the fire, gave a slight, involuntary movement—so slight as to be almost imperceptible. It was like the unconscious stiffening of the muscles of someone nerving himself to endure accustomed pain. Then he limped across the room to the window, slowly, as though drawn thither in spite of himself, and his gaze followed the figures of Maitland and Elizabeth as they passed down the drive together, side by side, talking and laughing as they went, completely absorbed in one another. A moment later, with a gay wave of their hands to Jane, who was just returning from feeding her poultry, they had swung round the bend and were lost to sight.

Jane, approaching the house, could not fail to see that solitary figure at the window, and what she saw made her catch her breath with the realisation that all she had dreaded had come to pass. The keen morning sunlight, pouring obliquely across the house-front, betrayed every line of Colin's face with merciless clarity, and as Jane's glance absorbed the stark misery revealed in his eyes, and in the twisted, bitten lips, she felt her heart contract.

She had tortured herself with questionings as to how things stood with him ever since the day when Elizabeth

had come back from Lone Edge and the shy, radiant happiness in her face had given away her secret even before she actually confided it in words. But, at the time, Colin had evinced such complete composure and reticence that it had been impossible to tell from his demeanour whether Elizabeth's engagement affected him personally or not. He had congratulated her with the tender sincerity, touched with a kind of whimsical humour, which an elder brother might have used towards a beloved little sister in like circumstances, and since then, whenever Maitland dropped in at Brownleaves or came to take Elizabeth out hunting or for a motor-run, he had tactfully, but not in the least pointedly, effaced himself.

But now the mask was down. The man standing there alone at the window, secure, as he thought, from observation, was suffering an agony of mind that scored itself haggardly on his face, and, feeling that she had inadvertently stumbled upon something which should have been kept hidden, surprised a soul in its nakedness, Jane dived into the nearest clump of bushes and, taking her way down a narrow path which digressed from the drive itself, hurried back to the house unobserved. Colin should never know that she had seen him— ke that. Once she paused, clenching her hand tightly.

"Oh, God!" she whispered to herself. "If only he needn't have had this to bear, too! It's *unfair.*"

Deep in her heart there stirred a faint, fugitive hope. As yet, the fact of Elizabeth's engagement was being kept a secret, by her own desire. She did not want to write to her father about it, but proposed to tell him on his return to England. "If I write," she said, "he'll only worry and fuss and want to know what Blair's like. The

chances are he'd dash back from the Continent just in order to find out, and that would completely spoil his holiday with Violet." Jane was fain to acknowledge that there was a very great probability of truth in Elizabeth's forecast of what might happen, so that she and Colin had finally concurred in the decision to keep the engagement private for the present. And now she wondered in her heart whether, when he came, Candy might not refuse to sanction it, and if so, if it were broken off, there might at some future time be a chance for Colin. Girls got over things. . . . Here Jane checked her thoughts abruptly, overwhelmed by a sudden rush of self-reproach. She knew that Elizabeth was not the sort to "get over things" very easily. If anything ever happened to separate her from Blair, she would suffer as any child born of Irene, poor, passionate, undisciplined Irene, must be bound to suffer. And Jane would not wish to buy even Colin's happiness at the price of another's grief.

When, later on, she went in search of him, she found him sitting by the fire, apparently immersed in the morning newspaper. He laid it down, however, on her entrance, and as her glance sought his face she was thankful to see that it no longer wore the expression of desperate pain which had so wrung her heart. It was grave, and the eyes had a deep sadness, backwash of that solitary anguish through which he had passed, but he greeted her with a smile.

"All well?" he inquired.

She nodded.

"Rather. Those broods which hatched out in September are doing splendidly, in spite of the weather. People talk a lot of nonsense about poultry. It's a thoroughly profitable job if you look after it properly." Purposely

she pitched her speech in as matter-of-fact a key as possible. " What's wrong in most cases is that people are too lazy to attend to things."

"Well, no one could accuse you of laziness," returned Colin, adding rather bitterly: "I'm the drone here."

"You're not!" she protested loyally. "Don't you keep all the accounts, and look after the car and do most of the gardening? I should think that's job enough for one man."

"For half a man, perhaps," he retorted.

Jane planted herself firmly in front of him.

"Don't dare to speak like that, Colin. Any man who went through that ghastly war and suffered as you suffered then—and have done ever since—is a *man.* So" —firmly—"don't talk rot."

"All right, old dear. But, don't you see, now and then one longs for a job—a real hard job that a man who doesn't crock up periodically, as I do, can take, if only to keep one from thinking."

"To keep one from thinking?" In a moment she had dropped to her knees on the hearthrug beside him. "Does thinking—hurt, then, Colin?"

Her eyes, those brown eyes of hers, limpidly clear and faithful as a dog's, searched his face.

"'M, sometimes," he admitted.

Jane took her courage in both hands.

"Is it—Elizabeth?" she said.

He nodded, his eyes suddenly hard.

"Yes. You may as well know now as later. I suppose a benign Providence thought that I hadn't sufficient to put with in this life, so shoved on an extra trifle by way of a make-weight." There was a note of bitter mockery in his voice. " Maitland has health and money,

and—apparently—quite a decent modicum of fame, so, on the principle of 'to him that hath,' he gets the woman he wants as well."

"I know—I know." Jane spoke quietly, but there was an infinite understanding in those two words she uttered. "It does seem hard—damned hard, old thing. But—" Her lips quivered sensitively. It was an argument she had never used before, even in his blackest moods, and she shrank from using it now. "But you're not the only one who has missed the best thing in life, Colin."

There was an infinitesimal pause. Then the hardness melted slowly out of his face, to be replaced by its customary expression of tolerance and kindliness. She had struck the right note, recalled him to his instinctive thought for others.

"My dear," he said swiftly. "Forgive me. One almost forgets, sometimes, because of your magnificent pluck. You make me ashamed of myself. Well—" He smiled across at her, the quick, characteristic smile which seemed almost to illumine his rather worn face, giving it a peculiar charm. "Well, you shan't hear me grumble again. I've had my grouse—got it off my chest—and that's the end of it."

And so, outwardly, it was, but as the days wore on it seemed to Jane as though a more settled gravity grew upon him, and her heart often ached for this beloved brother of hers whose life seemed so strangely destined to suffering and unfulfilment.

Even Elizabeth, although quite naturally absorbed in her own new happiness, was struck by the alteration in him, and one day, in all innocence of heart, she taxed him with it. They happened to be alone together late

one afternoon, and that sense of cosy intimacy which the combination of firelight and dusk always seems to engender emboldened her to approach the matter. She looked across at his grave, brooding face, as they sat on opposite sides of the hearth, and a gleam of mirth flickered round the corners of her mouth.

"Colin, you dear old dunderhead," she exclaimed at last, "why don't you screw up your courage and ask her—instead of going about looking exactly as if she'd turned you down. I suppose"—on a hasty afterthought—"she *hasn't* refused you?"

He shook his head.

"No, she's not refused me."

"Of course not. I knew you hadn't even given her chance," went on Elizabeth, with disapproval.

"Perfectly true—I haven't," he acknowledged.

"Then, won't you, Colin?" She leaned forward impulsively in her chair, her slender hands tightly clasped as they rested on her knee. "Won't you?" she continued earnestly. "I'm sure she won't turn you down, really—and I do so want you to be as happy as I am."

A very tender, sad little smile crossed his lips as his glance rested on the charming face with its intent, beseeching eyes.

"No," he said quietly, "I shall never tell her—now."

"Oh, but why?" she persisted pleadingly. "Don't you remember you once told me—you almost promised that you would ask her some day? . . . Colin, I'm sure—*sure* that your lameness, which you exaggerate into such a big thing, wouldn't make the faintest difference to her. I told you so then, and now——" The eager girlish voice dropped all at once to a soft pulsating tone that somehow reminded Colin of the low, thrilling note of a

bird calling to its mate in springtime. "And now, you see, I know so much more about this business of being in love, Colin, dear. Do you suppose it would make a pin of difference to me if Blair were lame? Why, I should love him all the more—only that wouldn't be possible!"

"No," he agreed gently. "I don't suppose it would make any difference to you."

"Well, then?" There was a mixture of triumph and appeal in her voice.

Colin made a sudden violent gesture. She was torturing him beyond bearing.

"Can't you understand?" he burst out harshly, at last. "I shall never ask her now, because—you were the woman."

"Oh!—" The exclamation broke from her like a stifled cry, and she sat gazing at him with frightened, dismayed eyes. "Oh, Colin!" The revelation of the truth had come upon her as such a complete surprise that for a moment she felt too overwhelmed to answer him.

He got up and moved restlessly across to the window, where he stayed silently staring out over the distant sea. She made no effort to break the silence. For the moment she felt too distressed and stricken to know what to say. Presently he came back to her side and, leaning against the chimneypiece, stood staring down at her.

"Did you never guess, little Elizabeth?" he said. And now all the harshness and bitterness had gone out of his voice and it was only very gentle and rather sad. "It seems so queer to me that you should never have guessed. I thought it must have been only too obvious that I cared for you."

"It—it wasn't," she stammered. "You see, there was

no particular reason why you *should* care for me, was there?"

He smiled a little.

"I don't suppose there ever is any particular reason why a man falls in love with a woman. He—just does it. . . . Although I could think of a hundred reasons why I should care for you—the principal one being that you are you," he added whimsically. "And if you require any others, wasn't it natural, almost inevitable, when fate sent a very sweet and charming person quite suddenly into the humdrum life of a lame dog, who never expected to be taken any notice of again by sweet and charming people, that the lame dog should fall in love with her? I think so."

Elizabeth held out a wavering hand.

"Colin, I'm so sorry," she faltered unhappily. "I'm so dreadfully sorry. . . . I don't know what to do."

He took the small, outstretched hand and held it closely in his.

"Shall I tell you?" he said quietly.

She nodded.

"Then—just behave as if this hadn't happened. Forget it. And go on giving me the same friendship you've given ever since you came here. Because"—his mouth twisted crookedly a moment—"because I can't have all I want, because I can't have your love, you needn't leave me without anything. . . . I—want to keep my pal, Elizabeth."

She jumped up impulsively.

"Oh, Colin, do you? Do you really still want me—as that? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," he answered steadily.

"Why, then, Colin, dear, you've got that always. You

must know it. I'll be so happy if you'll let me go on being your pal."

Her young face was upturned to his, all the impulsive warm-heartedness of her glowing in her eyes. He bent his head and kissed her very gently on the mouth—a kiss that sealed a friendship, taking nothing from Blair that should have been his.

"Pals, then," he said. "And you'll wipe out to-day from your diary. Cut the page out."

"Yes," she agreed. "Pals—always, Colin."

But her voice was a little tremulous. No true woman can remain unmoved by the knowledge that a man for whom she feels a genuine friendship and affection has given her his love, and the recollection of the mingled sweetness and sadness and regret of the moment of discovery is not so easily expunged from the diary of memory.

CHAPTER XV

SEVERAL PEOPLE'S LOVE-AFFAIRS

"MISS ELIZABETH'S gone out, sir."

As she spoke Sarah regarded Maitland's face with a compassionate twinkle in her eye. Matrimonial engagements may be kept as profoundly secret as you like from the world at large, but they will never remain secret from the servants of the household, and Sarah, although no one had uttered a word on the subject to her, was as perfectly aware of the existing position of things between Blair and Elizabeth as they themselves. Hence the compassionate twinkle in her shrewd, light-coloured eyes as she delivered the information that Elizabeth had gone out.

"Gone out?" repeated Maitland blankly.

Sarah nodded.

"Yes, sir. She's gone to Starranbridge in the car with Mr. Colin, and they won't be back till afternoon." Then, taking pity on his obvious surprise and disappointment, she added explanatorily: "I think 'twas all arranged sudden-like. Miss Elizabeth wanted to match some silk or something."

Blair's face cleared.

"Oh, all right, then," he said hastily. "Give her these flowers when she comes in, will you?" And pressing a great sheaf of lovely hot-house blooms into Sarah's gnarled old hands, he swung round and took his departure. He had not gone far, however, before, over the top of a gateway, he espied Jane, clad in stout boots and a service-

able overall, engaged in feeding her poultry. She caught sight of him almost at the same moment and, with a wave of the big wooden ladle with which she was measuring out some corn, she came across to him.

"Good morning," she said, shaking hands over the top of the gate. "Elizabeth's gone into Starranbridge. She asked me to tell you when you came. Colin had to go in to see his banker about something or other, so, as she wanted to do some shopping, she took the opportunity of driving in with him."

"I know. Sarah's already broken the news to me," he replied. "From the tactful way in which she performed the task," he continued, with a note of amusement in his voice, "I feel convinced she has no illusions as to the state of things."

Jane's face clouded over.

"No," she rejoined slowly. "I don't suppose she has. You know, Blair, I feel a tiny bit worried about it all."

"Worried? Why on earth?"

"Well, I wish her father knew. You see, in a way, I'm responsible for her till her people come home, and—and it's rather awkward your being seen so much together when you're not actually engaged."

"But we are," he answered gaily. "Very much engaged."

She smiled in spite of herself. His gaiety and good spirits were infectious. Then the smile faded and she resumed soberly:

"Yes, I know you are. I know—and Colin. But other people don't, and it's bad in two ways. Either they think you're *not* engaged—and in that case probably consider I'm chaperoning Elizabeth very inadequately, or else they suspect that you *are*. And then probably talk about it!

In which case the news might quite possibly reach Candy in some roundabout way—news travels in the most extraordinary fashion—and if he heard of your engagement all of a sudden, like that, he would be simply furious. The fat *would* be in the fire, then, and no mistake," she added with a rueful smile.

"I suppose it would." Blair drew several complicated patterns on the muddy surface of the road with his walking-stick. "I suppose it would," he repeated dubiously. "But I really don't see why people should suspect us. After all, we don't carry an 'ENGAGED' label tied round our necks."

"No," retorted Jane, with some amusement. "But you do on your faces. He who runs may read—if he has any gift for intelligent observation. And the village of Waincliff isn't entirely populated by congenital idiots, you know! . . . Well, I must get on with my work. Only "—nodding her head at him emphatically—"I shall be really thankful when Candy elects to return to the home of his forefathers and relieves me of the responsibility of you and Elizabeth."

Blair, thinking matters over as he pursued his solitary way home, was forced to admit that Jane's remarks contained more than a substratum of truth. When a man and woman find their supreme happiness in each other's company, it is very difficult to conceal the fact from observation. Some people, of course, never notice anything until it is actually forced upon their attention. Of such are the individuals who, upon hearing of the engagement of a couple whose love-affair has been progressing for several months along obvious and well-established lines, right under their very noses, as it were, greet its ultimate announcement with some such idiotic exclamation as:

"Well, I *am* surprised! I never *suspected* such a thing!"

But there are others who seem to possess a species of "love-sense," an instinct which warns them surely when that strange, mystic fire, which can neither be kindled nor quenched at will, has lit itself in the heart of anyone they know—more especially in the heart of someone they love. And amongst these could be numbered that embodiment of guttersnipe shrewdness and primitive, passionate femininity which was Poppy Ridgway.

She had divined instantly, on the evening she had met Blair and Elizabeth returning together from Lone Edge and had fled past them like some hunted wild thing, that they loved each other, and she had startled Blair considerably the next day by demanding if that "other woman" were going to make any difference between them.

"Make any difference, Poppy?" he had answered rather blankly. "Why, what do you mean, child?"

"I mean that now—now you're in love with Miss Frayne—p'r'aps you won't want me around any longer?"

"Aren't you rather assuming things?" suggested Blair. "I've never told you that I *was* in love with Miss Frayne."

"Hoo!" Poppy's red lips curved scornfully. "I don't need any telling. Not likely!"

Suddenly she made a little rush to his side and caught at his arm with tense, clinging fingers.

"See here," she said breathlessly, her voice coming in quick, palpitating jerks. "I know I could never marry you. You're a gentleman, and I'm common as dirt. But I'd give you . . . anything you wanted—anything!"

There was no misunderstanding her, no misunderstanding the passionate adoration written on the ardent,

glowing face—beautiful as few faces are beautiful—upturned to his. Her great eyes implored him, her soft young body pressed up against his with all the supple abandonment of utter longing and self-surrender. In one swift moment of startled revelation Blair realized that what Poppy felt for him was no meek, dog-like devotion, born of gratitude for all that he had done and all that he had saved her from, but the sheer, passionate love of a woman for one man—for the man with whom she would mate and for whom she is ready to live and die.

He was silent for a moment, wrung with a sense of pitiful regret for this child-woman who had given her love so recklessly, so hopelessly where it could find no possible return. Even had he not already met and loved Elizabeth, the differences of birth and upbringing would have stood for ever betwixt him and Poppy Ridgway. His world was not hers—never could be. Yet, from the other side of that impassable gulf which lay between them, she loved him so that nothing on earth counted with her except that love! *"I'd give you anything you wanted—anything!"* And the terrible part of it was that there was no gift of hers that he had need of, or desired. It was tragic—the bleak, ironical tragedy which reiterates through life.

When at last he answered her, it was very gently but with an unmistakable directness.

"Only, don't you see, Poppy, there's nothing you can give me that I want. Except what you *do* give me—what you've always given me ever since we've worked together—your time and your infinite patience."

"Infinite fiddlesticks!" She whisked away from him. She was flushed, and her brown-gold eyes still glowed

duskily with the impulse of passion which had flamed up in her, but, rather surprisingly, she accepted what he said without protest. Some subconscious inhibition, born of tradition, of an inner recognition of the immutability of caste, forbade her to fight against it. "You know there's nothing I love better than sitting for you. You've been a brick to me—always. Picked me up out of the gutter, you did. If there's anything I could ever do to pay you back, you bet I'd do it—if it cost me my skin."

"I'm very sure you would," replied Blair. "You're the best of good little pals. Now come along and give me a sitting for Delilah."

So the unexpected scene had ended on a note of every-day good comradeship and Maitland, engrossed in his new-found happiness, had almost forgotten it until his conversation with Jane brought it back vividly to his memory and started him on a train of rather serious thought. By the time he reached Lone Edge, he had come to the conclusion that, from all points of view, it would put matters on a more satisfactory footing when Frayne returned to Waincliff and his engagement to Elizabeth could receive the parental sanction and be made public.

Meanwhile Jane, having satisfied the hunger of her feathered protégés, betook herself to the dairy, and while her hands were busy churning and washing and salting butter, her thoughts took the same direction which Blair's had done. She could see all the disadvantages of this "private engagement business," as she termed it to herself, and she wished very much that there were somebody with whom she could discuss the matter and whose advice she could ask. Over any other difficulty she would have shared the vexation of her soul with Colin, but, in the

circumstances, Elizabeth's engagement was the very last topic which could be discussed between them.

"Oh, why the dickens doesn't Candy come home!" she exclaimed aloud, giving the big lump of butter in front of her an irritable whack with the flat wooden "hand" with which she was about to shape it into pounds and half-pounds ready for market.

As she spoke a shadow fell across the spotless white-tiled floor of the dairy, and, glancing quickly round, she discovered Sutherland's big, familiar figure standing in the open doorway. He was enveloped in an enormous motor-coat, and from some distance away came the even chug-chug of his waiting car. Jane beamed a welcome.

"Good morning, Wise Man. 'Fraid I can't shake hands—mine are all buttery."

He smiled as he scrutinised the hands she extended for his inspection.

"On the whole, I'm inclined to agree with you. You've got a jolly old lot of butter there, I see," he went on, eyeing the glistening, golden mass with approval. "How do you manage to bring your cows up so well? They never seem to go on strike as other people's do."

"Good food and punctual milking," replied Jane promptly. "I'm a veritable martinet with my man over that last point. Still, of course, the quantity of milk varies. Just now I've quite an imposingly big dairy, for me. My best Jersey presented the world with a calf a short time ago, and now I've presented the said calf to the butcher—for a *quid pro quo* in Treasury notes, naturally!—so we've plenty of milk coming in. Would you like a pound of special Brownleaves butter to take back to your lonely bachelor home?" she added gaily.

"I'd love it. No one's ever heard me say no to a really

handsome offer. And I always appreciate your butter—you know that."

Jane proceeded to cut off a portion and smack and pat it into shape. Then, having decorated it with a neat diamond pattern of criss-cross lines, she wrapped it up deftly in grease-proof paper and held it out.

Sutherland, as he took it from her with one hand, fumbled in the capacious pocket of his motor-coat with the other, finally producing from its depths a large and expensive-looking box of chocolates.

" 'Fair exchange,' " he observed gruffly, tendering the beribboned package with a blundering, almost boyish shyness. "I got these for you in Starranbridge yesterday. I hope they're decent."

"Nice man!" Jane smiled her thanks, conscious of a queer little tug at her heart—a tug of regret that she could never give this big, lovable, grown-up boy the thing he wanted. "They look excessively 'decent'—if the picture on the box is anything to go by."

Sutherland nodded his satisfaction, and then, leaning against the framework of the doorway, looked down at her speculatively.

"And now what's the trouble?" he asked quietly.

The abrupt question took her by surprise.

"Trouble?" she said. "Why should you think there is any?"

"Because I heard you muttering explosively to yourself when I arrived—something about wishing Candy would come back! Can't I do anything for you that Candy would, or could do, if he were here?" There was a note of wrathful indignation in his voice. "I'd like to, anyway, if you'd let me."

Jane's eyes were very soft as she answered him.

"I know you would. And I think you could—do most things, dear Wise Man. But I'm afraid you can't help in this particular matter. You can't "—with a rueful smile—"lift the burdens of a chaperon from off my shoulders."

"So that's it, is it? Maitland and Elizabeth?" She nodded, and he went on crisply: "I quite agree. The sooner Frayne comes home the better. Those two will be getting engaged if he doesn't."

"But they *are* engaged!" Taken off her guard, the truth was out before she could check it.

"Good God!" The exclamation broke almost violently from Sutherland's lips, and Jane saw, with a sudden sense of apprehension, the swift dismay which leaped into his eyes.

"But it's to be kept private—quite private till Candy comes home. I oughtn't to have let it out, Jack," she explained with speedy contrition. "You'll remember not to mention it to anyone else, won't you?"

"Don't worry. I'll remember," he said briefly. "But do you mean to tell me that they are actually engaged?" There was no pleasure in his tones, none of the natural kindly interest which one might have expected him to evince, but, instead, a grave disapprobation, a note of recoil, as though the idea were repugnant in some way.

"Jack, what do you mean?" Jane spoke with nervous haste. "Is—is there any reason why they *shouldn't* be engaged? I mean any real, big reason?"

"That all depends on your point of view."

"Oh!"—impatiently. "Don't be so guarded! Frankly, do you know anything against Blair? Please tell me," she added pleadingly.

If Sutherland hesitated before replying, the hesitation was so slight that she failed to notice it.

"I shouldn't choose him as a husband for any daughter of mine. But, frankly, I can't tell you anything against him."

And it was not until weeks later, when the whole horizon had grown black with clouds and Elizabeth's happiness seemed equally as lost as her own, that Jane realised how infinitely guarded, shielding her from useless fear and anxiety until the trouble was actually upon them, Sutherland's ultimate reply had been. She heaved a sigh of relief.

"You can't? Then we needn't worry," she said. "I verily believe, Jack, you're still harping in your mind on the fact that Blair was once Private Smithers."

He glanced at her curiously.

"I believe I am. Anyway, don't let's talk about him any more. Let's talk about ourselves."

"About ourselves?"—doubtfully.

"Yes." He took a step forward, nearer to her side. "Jane, don't you think you'll ever be able to give me a different answer?"

Beneath the sudden urgency of his gaze her own fell.

"Do you mean—to the—the same old question?" she said falteringly.

"Yes, to the same old question. It hit me hard to hear you wishing that Frayne were back to help you in a difficulty. . . . If you'd only marry me I'd be always around to help you and look after you. It'd be my right. . . . I'd take such care of you, Jane, dear." His deep voice shook a little.

With an effort she lifted her eyes to his face. It hurt her badly to know that she must hurt him, this big, lonely,

lovable man who only asked to be allowed to pour out all the treasure of his love at her feet. But she had no use for compromise—never had had. However much it might hurt her to give him pain, she must be honest with her own soul and with him.

"I can only give you the same old answer, Wise Man," she said sorrowfully. "I can't ever marry you. You see, Dick was everything to me—and he's never anything less. No one else has ever counted."

"I know—I know. My dear, I'm not asking to take Dick's place in your heart—I'm not conceited fool enough for that. I'm only asking for the right just to love you, to take care of you and keep the hard things of life away from you." The strong tenderness of his voice beat against Jane's heart like an insistent pulse. "I'd never expect too much," he went on gently. "I want you to understand that—believe that. I should never ask for anything you weren't willing to give me—only the right to call you my wife and to take care of you."

He ceased, and for a moment she was silent, touched to the core of her being by his simple self-abnegation, by the chivalrous, understanding fineness of the love he offered her. But it was all no use. She could give him no other answer than the one she had given him so many times before.

"Jack, dear, I couldn't, if I would, give you the answer you want. Even if—if I cared for you in the way a woman should care for the man she marries, I still couldn't marry you."

"Why not?"

"Because of Colin. He has first claim on my life for ever and ever. His own is smashed up irretrievably. Dick saved him and lost his own life doing it, and he's

more than just a brother—he's Dick's legacy to me. So I must look after Colin, dear—not you, or any other man. You don't need me as he does."

"I do. . . . You're simply making a burnt-offering of yourself on the altar of Colin," protested Sutherland obstinately. "And it's not necessary or right. No man is worth a woman's sacrificing the whole of her life to running about after him and waiting on him."

She shook her head. Her eyes held a curious light in them, almost mystical—saint's eyes, was the thought of the man who stood watching her.

"The man Dick thought worth dying for is worth my living for," she said quietly. Then, after a long pause, she spoke more lightly. "So Colin's my job in life. That and the ponies. Which reminds me, I've bought a new one, and I must be off to lunge him in one of the fields as soon as I've finished up here in the dairy. He's perfectly raw—been running wild on a farm, so I've got to break him in."

Sutherland made a gesture of annoyance.

"You'll break yourself one day with these damned ponies of yours!" he declared wrathfully.

"Then you can come along and pick up the pieces," she replied sweetly. "Now run away, Wise Man," she admonished, "and don't ask me to marry you again for at least a year."

"I shall," he returned with great firmness as he pulled up his motor-coat preparatory to departure. "I shall go on asking you to marry me until one day you say 'yes' out of sheer boredom."

He strode away, and, after he had gone, she bustled about in the dairy, trying to make up for the lost time his visit had occasioned. She was glad to have seen him.

Her worries seemed to bulk less largely on the horizon since his advent; he was always so big and kind and dependable.

"All the same," she reflected, "I do wish Candy would come back soon. Jack can't be of any actual help just now, however much he would like to be."

And with the next morning came a letter for Elizabeth from her father, saying that he and Violet were on their way home and that he had sent instructions to Mrs. Dove, the housekeeper, to prepare Frayne Abbey for their arrival.

CHAPTER XVI

CANDY'S RETURN

FOR the last half-hour Elizabeth had been dancing in and out of the rooms at Frayne Abbey, putting finishing touches to the flowers which she had already arranged and rearranged several times, poking up fires until they crackled and blazed into a ruddy welcome—or else gave signs of early dissolution consequent upon too drastic poking and had to be resuscitated by one of the housemaids with a bundle of sticks—plumping up cushions, and wiping imaginary specks of dust from off polished surfaces.

Every now and again she varied these activities by a swift, breathless sortie to the top of the granite steps which descended from the ancient, nail-studded oaken door that had given entrance and exit to the Abbey since time immemorial. From here she commanded a view of the long straight avenue of elms—one of the most famous features of Frayne—at the far end of which, at any moment now, she might expect to see sweeping into view the car that was bringing Candy, accompanied by Violet, back to his old home. They were motoring from London, so that the exact moment of their arrival lay on the knees of the gods, but in his last letter, written and posted from Paris, Candy had said they proposed to reach the Abbey about four o'clock the following Thursday afternoon. And now at length the longed-for day was actually here,

and since half-past three Elizabeth had been on the tip-toe of eager expectation.

For the last few days Brownleaves had scarcely seen her. She had spent almost all her time over at the Abbey, where the housekeeper, Mrs. Dove, supported by a regiment of maids and men, had been busy making the final preparations for the return of the master of the house. Once or twice Elizabeth had been accompanied by Colin, but as a general rule it was Blair who had called for her in his car and, after they had spent the day together at Frayne, taking an active part in the proceedings, delivered her safely back again at Brownleaves in time for dinner.

Thoroughly busy and occupied as she was, and full of the joyful anticipation of Candy's return, she had hardly realised, until the actual day for her departure came round, how great a wrench it would mean to say farewell to Brownleaves. She had found her own niche there so simply and easily that the place had become a second home to her. Moreover, the months she had spent there had brought so much that was good and lovely of friendship and affection into her life—above everything, they had brought her the greatest gift of all, Blair's love.

So it was not unnatural that on the grey, wintry morning destined for her leave-taking she came downstairs labouring under an acute attack of low spirits. Nor did the general atmosphere of the house tend to raise them. Jane and Colin were both thoroughly depressed at the prospect of losing her, and even Sarah's bluff imperturbability had crumpled under the blow. She went about sniffling audibly, relieving her feelings every now and again by giving the unfortunate young housemaid, whose lot it was to labour under her vigilant supervision, a rousing good scolding. Once she came to the open door

of Elizabeth's bedroom and stood watching her while she tucked the last few odds and ends into her trunks. Her light-coloured eyes were rimmed with pink, and her nose red and shiny from vigorous application of her handkerchief.

"I never thought to be that sorry to see you go, miss," she remarked candidly. "I said to Miss Jane, I did, when you was coming, that a young lady from foreign parts would be more trouble than comfort in the house. And here you are"—sniff—"leavin' us"—sniff—"and it's for all the world as though one of the fam'ly was going away."

Elizabeth paused in her packing to fling her warm young arms round the old servant's neck and kiss her heartily.

"Thank you, Sarah dear," she said. "It's just lovely to hear you say that, because it's exactly how I feel—part of the family."

A shrewd look of wisdom crossed Sarah's face.

"Well, I'll say this, miss, that it's through no fault of one of them that you ain't truly and really part. But there! 'Twasn't likely that poor Mr. Colin would have any chance against a fine, upstanding gentleman like Mr. Maitland. Now you're going away, miss, I hope you won't mind me saying I've guessed how it is betwixt you and him—and wishin' you good luck."

Elizabeth laughed and blushed.

"Of course I don't mind, Sarah. Everybody will know about it as soon as we've told my father. We've only been waiting till he came home, you know."

Sarah nodded sagely.

"I suspicioned as much. Well, miss, I've never thought a mighty lot of matrimony myself. I've had my

chances, and I've never regretted passing them by, for men are kittle cattle—the best of 'em not what they might be. Still, miss, not wanting to be discouraging, I hope as 'ow you've picked one what's different from most, and, as I said before, I'm sure I wish you luck." And with a final furtive dab at her eyes Sarah departed below-stairs to rate the housemaid soundly for idling during her absence, leaving Elizabeth smiling a little over her lugubrious view of matrimony.

Bidding good-bye to Jane and Colin was another matter entirely, and Elizabeth had to force back her own tears as she kissed Jane for the last time and felt Colin's tense farewell hand-clasp.

"It's absurd, really, to be saying good-bye to you two," she declared, a little breathlessly. "I shall be coming over here constantly—that is, if you'll have me?"

"Of course it's absurd," agreed Jane briskly, her briskness covering a very real heartache. "And of course you'll come over here just whenever you like. You know you'll always be the most welcome visitor we could possibly have."

Elizabeth's eyes wandered rather forlornly over the front of the old-fashioned house, warm and friendly-looking, even on this dreary winter's day, with its ivy-clad walls and red-tiled roof, mellowed to a dull, soft bloom by the tender touches of time and weather.

"Only it won't be quite the same as *living* here," she said wistfully.

She had put into words what both the others were feeling.

"No, it won't be quite the same," agreed Colin shortly.

And then Elizabeth got into the car beside Maitland,

who was driving her across to the Abbey, and was borne swiftly away to her own untried home.

Now even Blair had gone, and she was quite alone, except for Mrs. Dove, who was hovering in and out of the hall, almost trembling with the excitement of seeing her old master once again. She was wearing her best black satin, and her crinkly grey hair peeped out from beneath a new lace cap donned in honour of the occasion.

"It's a long time, is fifteen years," she said once to Elizabeth, as she came and stood beside her on the doorstep. "The master was a young man when I last saw him." Her voice quivered a little.

Elizabeth smiled at her.

"You'll find him quite young still, Dovie," she answered kindly. "He's a positive kid at times."

"And Mrs. Frayne's young, too, so I hear, miss, and a very beautiful-looking lady?"

"Yes, she's young," asserted Elizabeth. "But she's never kiddish, like Candy is. And—oh, yes—she's beautiful, quite."

She had hardly finished speaking when at the far end of the long elm avenue there appeared a small, on-rushing speck which speedily increased in size, finally materialising into the eagerly awaited car. She uttered a cry of delight, and by the time the engine had throbbed to a standstill at the foot of the steps she had rushed down them in reckless, breakneck fashion, while Mrs. Dove faded discreetly away into the background.

"Oh, Candy *darling!*" Elizabeth simply hurled herself into Frayne's arms, oblivious of Violet, who had remained in the car, watching the reunion of father and daughter with a faint, not unkindly smile.

"Hullo, kiddy!" After that first fervent embrace,

Candy held the girl away from him a moment while he scrutinised her attentively. "Just the same old kiddy—not altered a scrap. That's good."

"Nor you—nor you," she replied eagerly, almost devouring with her gaze the lean, nut-brown face with its queer, slate-coloured eyes and mobile lips. She put up an impertinent hand and tweaked a lock of the black, waveless hair.

"Any more grey hairs, Candy?" she demanded.

"There ought to be, parted from the child of your old age for so long."

"Impudent infant! I'm a confounded sight more likely to develop them now I've got you on my hands again. But, see"—turning back to the car—"here's Violet."

"Waiting like patience on a monument to be taken notice of," smiled Violet, as she bent forward to exchange kisses with her stepdaughter.

Then they all trooped up the steps together, and Mrs. Dove reappeared from the dusky corner where she had sought temporary refuge and come forward, a little shyly, to greet her old master and his new wife—at least new in as far as she was concerned.

Frayne greeted her with the spontaneous, boyish charm of which not all his troubles had succeeded in despoiling him, the quick, sensitive charm which all through life had won him forgiveness for his faults—for his temper and his obstinate pride, and for the undeniable streak of selfishness that was inherent in him.

"Why, if it isn't dear old Dovie!" he exclaimed, and, without more ado, put his arms round her comfortable, black-satin person and kissed her warmly. "And not looking a day older, I swear!" he added, as Mrs. Dove

emerged, pink-cheeked and smiling rather tremulously, from his embrace.

"I might say the same of you, sir, and with a good deal more truth," she answered, a suspicious moisture misting her kind old eyes. As a young adoring nurserymaid of seventeen she had dandled Candy on her knees. Later, graduating upwards to the proud position of housekeeper, she had seen him grow from schoolboy to man, served him throughout the short years of his first wedded happiness, and finally watched him go when stark tragedy had driven him forth from the Abbey, and this day of his return home meant almost as much to her as it did to him.

Violet's clear voice broke like a bell across the rather heart-shaking moment.

"When you two have quite finished complimenting each other on your youthful appearance, I should like to say how d'-you-do to Mrs. Dove myself," she said, flashing the old housekeeper one of her sweetest smiles and holding out a small, gracious hand. "I've heard so much about you," she went on, "I feel as if I almost knew you already. So I hope you're prepared to take me under your wing as well as my husband? If not, I warn you, I'm going to be frightfully jealous."

Mrs. Dove capitulated at once. Looking into the charming face with its curling gold hair and appealing, speedwell-blue eyes, she then and there gave her allegiance to the new mistress of the Abbey as loyally as to Frayne himself. And that night, in the secrecy of her rather austere little bedroom, she went down on her dear old knees and thanked God from the bottom of her simple heart for having sent such a lovely lady into "Master Candy's" broken life to make it whole again.

"The Lord gives and the Lord takes away—and then

He gives again more abundantly than ever," she told Elizabeth the next morning. "I never thought, miss, fifteen years ago, that I should live to see the master look as proud and happy a man as he does to-day."

Proud and happy! Yes, Candy did look like that, and Elizabeth suddenly recognised that the fundamental source of all that pride and happiness lay in his wife and in his utter adoration of her. She had never realised it to the full until the old housekeeper's words brought it home to her with an irresistible poignancy. Disillusioned and embittered by Irene's faithlessness, Candy had been enabled to rebuild his faith and belief simply and solely because Violet had come into his life. Violet was rather an important person in the world, since she held Candy's whole happiness in the hollow of her hand, Elizabeth reflected. Her own mother had betrayed him—sometimes, even now, she was swept by a passion of resentment towards Irene for having hurt him like that. . . . God grant that Violet, at least, might never fail him!

CHAPTER XVII

A QUESTION OF LOYALTY

"WHAT! What did you say?" Frayne's voice held the sharpened note of someone who has just received such an unpleasant piece of news that he can hardly credit it.

Elizabeth felt her courage oozing a little. She had snatched at an after-breakfast opportunity—offered while Mrs. Dove was conducting Violet on a tour of inspection over the house—to break the news of her engagement to her father. She answered his sharp query a trifle tremulously.

"I was trying to tell you that I'd met someone I—I care for, Candy."

"Someone you care for?" For a moment Frayne regarded her as though he hardly comprehended what she was saying. Then a sudden light of understanding dawned on his eyes. "Great Scott, child! Are you trying to tell me that you've fallen in love?"

She nodded, flushing guiltily under his intent scrutiny.

"Something like that," she acknowledged in a small voice.

"Well, then, the sooner you fall out of it again the better," he returned easily. "You don't suppose, do you, that I'm going to allow you to run about falling in love, now I've come home? It was very careless of Jane to have let such a thing occur then"—smiling good-humouredly.

"But, Candy," protested Elizabeth. "I'm serious—I'm not joking." She was finding her father's light and airy fashion of brushing her news aside rather difficult to cope with. "I'm engaged to be married."

"Married?" The smile left Candy's face as though it had been wiped off with a sponge. The heavy import of that word "marriage" sobered him. "And how do you come to be 'engaged to be married' without my consent, may I ask?"

"Well, we want that, of course," she returned soothingly. "I meant I was engaged as far as I could be without that."

"Which isn't very far," he rejoined grimly. "Who's the man? I shall want to know a good deal about him before I consent to anything of that kind, I can assure you."

"Oh, naturally." Elizabeth hastened to agree. "But you do know something about him already. Do you remember the day I got caught in that storm on Lake Como, and a man came to my rescue in a motor-boat?" He nodded. "Well, that's the man—he was staying at Villa Felice then, and now he's living here at Waincliff."

"What's his name?"

"Maitland—Blair Maitland."

"Maitland—Maitland?" repeated Frayne. "Isn't he a sculptor chap? I've heard him spoken of in London."

"Oh, have you?" she exclaimed delightedly. "Yes, that's the one. And really, you know," she went on, trying to conciliate him, "he has some claim to me. But for him, I don't suppose I should be here at all!"

"That may be. But a woman isn't bound to marry a man just because he gets her out of a tight corner."

"Oh, don't be silly, Candy! I *want* to marry him."

"And I don't in the least want you to marry him—or any other man for the matter of that—for years to come! Anyway, there's no hurry. I suppose I shall meet him some day soon, since we're both living in the same neighbourhood."

"You'll meet him this morning," replied Elizabeth swiftly. "He's coming round. He may be here at any moment now."

"Coming round here? Oh, confound the fellow! He might have left me in peace the first day after I get home. Are there any more suitors for my daughter's hand likely to be turning up in the course of the morning?"

She smiled and shook her head.

"No, only this one. And it's really quite as much my fault as his that he's coming to see you so soon. You see, we—we found out we liked each other quite a long time ago, and we simply couldn't wait any longer for your blessing, Candy dear."

"Humph! I'm not at all sure that I'm going to give you my blessing," retorted Frayne. "I feel far more like heaping maledictions on the fellow's head."

"You won't—when you see him," she returned confidently. "He's really rather a dear, Candy—really he is."

"He'll need to be all that and a good deal more as well, if he wants to run off with my little daughter," said Frayne, a tender warmth creeping into his voice. "The man who marries you, kiddy, has got to show an absolutely clean record."

"I believe he did well in the war," she ventured.

"So did a good many thoroughly bad lots."

She laughed.

"Well, I'm sure he's not that. I once asked him if he'd ever done anything he was ashamed of, and he said 'No.'"

"Did he? Even so, that depends on what he calls something to be ashamed of. Opinions vary on that matter—considerably."

As he spoke, a ring at the front-door bell sounded in the distance.

"That'll be Blair," exclaimed Elizabeth hurriedly. She linked her arm in her father's. "You *will* be nice to him, won't you, Candy?" she said coaxingly.

"I shan't be violently rude to him on sight, if that's what you mean," replied Frayne non-committally. And that was the utmost she could drag out of him.

When, however, the two men finally met, he could not but acknowledge that, on the surface, there seemed nothing in Maitland to which he could take exception. On the contrary, he was distinctly attracted by him. He was an older man than Candy had expected, and bore himself with a certain characteristic air of strength and independence which rather appealed to him.

"I feel thoroughly ashamed of myself for butting in on you so soon after your arrival," Blair told him after they had talked together for a few minutes.

"I've already explained that I'm responsible for your early appearance on the scene," put in Elizabeth hastily.

"Well, you and this young daughter of mine seem to have progressed so far that I agreed it was time the stern parent stepped in," said Candy, with an unexpected geniality that went far to reassure her as to the ultimate outcome of his meeting with Blair.

"Supposing I leave you, then, to fight over my dead body?" she suggested, looking smilingly from one to

the other of the two men—*her* two men, as she reflected proudly in her heart.

"Just as you like," said Blair. "Now, or I'll come again for a talk whenever convenient to you, Mr. Frayne. Naturally, you'll want to know all about me."

"Naturally I shall," replied Candy dryly. But the dryness of the speech was modified by a humorous twinkle in his eyes, and when Elizabeth finally left them alone together, it was with a lighter heart than she had anticipated as possible from her father's first reception of her news.

When she rejoined them again, on receipt of a message from Candy, it was to find the two men on apparently excellent terms with each other.

"Well, I've given my consent, but very grudgingly," said Frayne. Adding whimsically : "I can't find out anything to this fellow's detriment, confound him, and he's unfortunately in a position to keep you as well as I can. But you'll have to wait a bit, both of you. I warn you of that. I shan't allow you to run off with my Elizabeth for a long time to come, Maitland."

Blair made no demur at this. He hadn't the slightest intention that either he or Elizabeth should be kept dangling on the string of a lengthy engagement, but he was diplomatic enough to recognise that this was a matter which could better be discussed later on, when Frayne had got over the initial shock of his daughter's being engaged at all. And just then the door opened to admit Violet, who had completed her tour of the Abbey.

"Let me introduce you to my wife," said Candy "Violet, this is Mr. Maitland—Blair Maitland—who, I regret to say, has made up his mind to marry Elizabeth."

The wintry morning's sunlight, streaming in through

the big windows of the library, dazzled her for a moment, so that Blair's face and figure appeared only as a shadowy blur. Then, as she turned and saw him clearly, her face altered. The soft rose-colour in her cheeks faded to a sudden chalky pallor, even her lips were white, and her blue eyes widened into a terrified stare. She swayed as though about to fall, and Candy sprang hurriedly to her side.

"Violet! What is it, my dear? Are you ill?"

She clung to him speechlessly for a moment. Then, drawing a long breath, like a sigh, she gave a rather shaky little laugh.

"I'm so sorry," she said weakly. "I felt—I felt faint for a moment. The room went round."

Candy gestured to Elizabeth.

" Some brandy—quickly."

But Violet signed a hasty negative.

"No, no," she said. "I'm all right now, really. Forgive me, Mr.—Mr. Maitland." She turned to Blair and held out her hand. Her small figure was drawn to its full height and in her eyes, as she lifted them to his face, there was a curious expression, as though she were defying him. " I've just been all over the Abbey with the housekeeper——"

"And you've done too much," put in Candy concisely. "It was foolish of you, Violet, to attempt it immediately on the top of a long journey. Sit down here." He pulled a chair up to the fire, and she sank into it with the inevitable grace of movement which seemed to belong to her.

"I'm afraid you must think me very stupid, Mr. Maitland," she apologised, with a charming little air of penitence. She was obviously recovering herself rapidly.

" Not at all," said Blair quietly. " I think it was

perfectly natural." As he spoke, his glance met hers very directly, and beneath the odd concentration of his gaze her eyes fell and a wave of vivid colour drove away the recent pallor of her face. His own face was curiously pale, but owing to the slight commotion occasioned by Violet's sudden attack of faintness no one noticed it.

"Perfectly natural," concurred Candy, with decision. "The Abbey takes a bit of going over, and you ought never to have thought of such a thing this morning, Violet. But there, a woman never knows how to look after herself."

"I think I had better take myself off," suggested Blair tactfully. "Mrs. Frayne will be all the better for a little rest, I'm sure."

Frayne regarded him with approval.

"Yes, she will," he agreed, continuing cordially, as he shook hands: "Well, you must let us see plenty of you, Maitland. Violet and I will have to get to know our future son-in-law. Only don't forget, either of you," he added laughingly, as Elizabeth and Blair left the room together, "that it's very much 'future.'"

They had scarcely been gone five minutes when a fresh visitor was ushered in.

"Jack Sutherland, by all that's holy!" exclaimed Candy, pump-handling the new-comer's hand delightedly up and down. "It's good to see you again, old son—no end good."

"I thought I'd look in on you as soon as ever I could," returned Sutherland with equal heartiness. "Welcome back to Waincliff. And how are you, Mrs. Frayne?" he went on, shaking hands with Violet. "Rather tired after your journey, I expect?"

Candy hastily explained.

"She's overdone herself trying to explore the whole of the Abbey at one fell blow, quite forgetting that we've been travelling for three days on end! Came back here and nearly fainted. . . . By the way, we've had the shock of our lives since our return," he went on. "What d'you think that child of mine's been up to while I've been away? Getting engaged, if you please!"

Sutherland nodded.

"I had more than a suspicion of it," he admitted.

"Oh, had you? Well, I've got a bone to pick with Jane Wentworth over it. Damn bad chaperon she must be!"

"I don't think Jane had much to do with it. These things—happen, you know, Candy," said the doctor, smiling. "And a chaperon's quite useless as a preventive. Have you"—his face sobering—"have you met Maitland yet? But, of course not. I was forgetting you've only just arrived."

"Oh, I've met him all right. That minx-child, Elizabeth, had him up here on the mat bright and early, and I was playing the heavy father just before you came."

"Have you given your consent, then?"

"Well, I suppose I have, provisionally—to an engagement anyway. But, of course, I know nothing about the man except what he's told me himself. I shall want a good bit more than that, naturally, before I give him Elizabeth for keeps."

"Naturally," assented Sutherland. His face was rather grave, a certain look of harassment in his eyes, as though he was pondering some difficult question.

"What did you think of him, Violet?" pursued Candy. "You were just going to tell me your opinion when old Jack blew in."

Violet was sitting staring thoughtfully into the fire when he suddenly addressed her. She allowed her white lids to fall, veiling her expression before she answered.

"It's rather difficult to give an opinion at a minute's notice, isn't it?" she said non-committally.

Candy looked at her sharply.

"That means you don't like him," he asserted.

A quick, annoyed frown puckered her brows.

"It doesn't mean anything of the kind," she returned rather pettishly. "How absurd you are, Candy. Why on earth *shouldn't* I like him?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," he replied, smiling down at her. "Any more than I know why on earth you *did* like me."

In a moment Violet was her charming self. No appeal to her sheer femininity could ever leave her untouched. She smiled back at her husband adorably.

"You dear silly man!" she said indulgently.

It was like the soft coo of a wood-pigeon, and Sutherland smiled inwardly—a rather grim little smile, for it was very evident how entirely this pretty spoilt woman held Frayne at her mercy. Shortly afterwards he took his leave, and as his car spun down the long elm avenue his thoughts were busy with his old chum and the two women, wife and daughter, who played such a big part in his life. Mentally he was very much perturbed, and, as always in moments of stress, he gravitated towards the woman who meant most in his own life. Almost without conscious volition he steered towards Brownleaves, and half an hour later found him engrossed in conversation with Jane. She had just finished exercising one of her ponies, and, eyes sparkling, cheeks flushed with her gallop

across the fields, she halted abruptly as his car pulled up in the adjoining lane. Dismounting, she slipped her arm through the pony's bridle and stood chatting for a moment.

"Come in and have a glass of my home-made sloe gin," she suggested. "I mustn't let this youngster stand about and catch cold, so if you want to gossip, come indoors and do it comfortably by the fire."

Together they walked on towards the stables, where Jane relinquished the pony into the care of her man before proceeding to the house, and presently she and Doctor Jack were seated one on each side of a roaring hearth fire, chatting companionably.

It was rather abruptly and without any preliminary manœuvring that Sutherland eventually introduced the matter which was occupying his thoughts.

"Jane," he said quietly, "I want your advice."

She smiled.

"Mine, Wise Man? This is rather a reversal of the usual order of things; it's generally I who come to you for counsel."

"I know. That's why it's up to you now to take your turn as adviser."

"Very well, I'll do my best. What's the trouble?"

"I can't tell you exactly what the trouble is, because it isn't my secret. But I'm going to put you a hypothetical case and you shall tell me what you think about it."

She nodded understandingly.

"All right," she said. "Go ahead."

"Well, supposing you had a great pal who was thinking of making friends with another woman—in my case, of course, it's with another man—about whom you hap-

pened to know something which, if *your* pal knew it, would effectually put an end to any possibility of friendship between the two. What would you do?"

"It sounds a trifle confusing," murmured Jane deprecatingly.

Sutherland laughed in spite of himself.

"Yes, it does, rather. I'll try to put it more clearly. My friend, whom we'll call Brown, is on the verge of making a close friend of—say, Robinson. Now, by chance, I happen to know of something that happened in Robinson's past life which is greatly to his detriment. Brown would probably—certainly—have nothing to do with Robinson if he shared my knowledge, and would blame me for keeping it from him. On the other hand, Robinson is now leading a perfectly decent life, and it's playing it frightfully low down on him if I give away what I know. You see, actually, it's a question of whether to damn a man utterly for his past offences or whether to hold my peace."

"It *would* damn him?" asked Jane quickly.

Sutherland's eyes met hers squarely.

"It would."

For a moment she made no answer. Then she said thoughtfully:

"There's the question of loyalty to *your* friend, too, isn't there? To—to Brown."

"Yes," he agreed gravely. "There's the question of loyalty."

"It's a terribly difficult matter to give advice on," she said, with a troubled frown. "To be fair to one man you've got to sacrifice the other—whichever you do. Either poor Robinson's got to have the burden of all his former sins slung round his neck again—or else you're

going to let Brown in for something he ought not to be let in for."

"That's the case in a nutshell."

For a long time she remained silent, gazing into the fire, while Sutherland watched her intently. He could almost read the conflicting current of her thoughts in her face. He himself was torn by the difficulty of coming to a decision in the matter. Only two courses lay open to him, and he shrank from either. Deep in his own heart he felt that he knew which course he ought to take—but it seemed so hard, to fall so heavily upon one of the two men concerned. So he had put the question up to Jane. If her clear-visioned insight saw the matter in the same light as he saw it himself, he would act according to his conviction, but if it differed, then he was prepared to reconsider the whole subject again from a fresh angle—Jane's angle.

At last she spoke.

"Brown is really—a *friend?*" she asked. "Not just an acquaintance?"

"Brown is really a friend."

"Then I think," she said gently, regretfully, "your loyalty to your friend must come before your pity for the other man. In the one case you're letting down a man who has the biggest claim in the world *not* to be let down by you, the claim of friendship. In the other you're letting down a man who has no actual personal claim on you whatever. I'm afraid, Wise Man, you must tell Brown the truth."

Sutherland nodded.

"That was my own thought," he said. He squared his shoulders a trifle, as though nerving himself to do something that was utterly repugnant to him. "And

since you think the same, the matter's settled. Though I shall feel a brute—doing that other poor devil down."

Jane sighed.

"There are a lot of difficult questions to decide in this world," she said rather sadly.

He bent forward suddenly and looked searchingly into her face.

"You've decided yours. I suppose—you *have* quite decided, Jane?" he said wistfully.

Her brown eyes met his with the old directness—a directness tinged with tender regret.

"Yes, dear Wise Man, I have decided. There's the question of loyalty, you see, for me, too. I think," she added, after a pause, "that loyalty—loyalty to someone or something—is responsible for almost everything a decent person does or leaves undone. It may be a mistaken loyalty, sometimes, but it's loyalty all the same."

And neither of them guessed how vividly and forcefully those words were to come back to them in the days that followed.

CHAPTER XVIII

A GLIMPSE OF THE PAST

"YOU'VE been longer over the 'Delilah' than over anything else I've ever sat to you for." Thus Poppy, from her seat on the big turntable in the studio.

Maitland laughed a little. He was feeling in extraordinarily good spirits. His interview with Elizabeth's father that morning had gone off more satisfactorily than he could have expected in his most wildly optimistic moments—judging from all that he had heard concerning Candover Frayne. And he was now actually engaged—parental sanction included—to Elizabeth. It was wonderful—so wonderful that he felt almost afraid, with that strange, queer fear that sometimes besets us in moments of supreme happiness. Nor, in Blair's case, was that slinking, nameless undercurrent of apprehension entirely causeless. Something had occurred to-day to bring back forcibly to his memory events and circumstances which he thought he had put behind him for ever. Still, they *were* past—utterly past. He knew that. Only—he would rather not have been reminded of them on this day of all days.

"So you think I'm being damn slow over my job? Is that it?" he said, replying good-humouredly to Poppy's criticism. "Well, to be honest, I've not been working quite so regularly as usual, have I? Besides"—an enigmatic smile flickered across his mouth—"there are always

certain subtle touches which one can add to a Delilah, you know. One lives and learns."

"Huh!" Poppy threw contempt on what she manifestly considered a feeble excuse. "I don't suppose you've learned anything fresh since yesterday, have you? Waincliff isn't the sort of place where you find Delilahs lurking around much."

"I'm not so sure about that. And, quite frankly, I think I *have* learned something since yesterday, Poppy. Any Delilah has to have a certain amount of nerve, you know, afterwards—if she happens to run up against shorn Samson again."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said rather sullenly.

"Probably not. I don't even think I'm very clear on the subject myself. So let it go at that. Now, my child, I'm going to knock off work on this for to-day, so you may go home."

Poppy slipped agilely down from the turntable.

"Shall I help tidy up?" she said.

Blair shook his head.

"No, you can run off. I shall probably be pottering about here for some time. I want to do a bit of work on that Centaur"—he gestured in the direction of a vigorous figure of a centaur that had place on another modelling-stand.

Poppy glanced in the same direction.

"Oh, that man-horse thing?" she returned disparagingly. "I don't think much of that. I like the ones you do of me best," she added with calm complacency.

"So do I, Poppy. But, you see, it's not always good for the soul of man to do what he likes best. In fact"—with a wry smile—"it very rarely is."

She regarded him with big, puzzled eyes.

"You're talking very funnily to-day," she said at last, disapproval rife in her tones.

"Am I? Well, it's been a funny sort of day, in some ways, so I expect it's had an effect on my conversational powers."

He switched off one electric burner and switched on another which threw a better light upon the Centaur, while Poppy, with curiosity and bewilderment still written large in her eyes, proceeded to put on her hat and coat.

"Good night," she said at last reluctantly. "Shall I come the same time as usual to-morrow morning? You didn't work at all this morning, you know."

"No. I know I didn't. I was"—smiling reminiscently —"better employed. Work, Poppy, is one of the best things going when you're unhappy. But when you're happy it's not quite so important."

"And are you—happy just now?"

"'M." He nodded absently, occupied at the moment in dragging the modelling-stand on which the Centaur rested into a more convenient position.

"I'm glad." There was a queer, stifled note in her voice. The next moment she had quitted the studio, hurrying away into the winter dusk outside, and the door closed behind her with a bang.

For half an hour or more Blair worked on industriously at his Centaur, gradually becoming so engrossed as to be unconscious of his surroundings. Thus it was that when a faint, rather uncertain knock sounded on the studio door—the one leading into the garden, through which, a little earlier, Poppy had taken her departure—it made no impression on his mind whatever. Presently the knock was repeated, this time a little more loudly.

Still Blair remained completely oblivious, and it was not until the door was opened slightly, allowing a current of cold air to cut across the genial warmth disseminated by the studio stove, that he came abruptly out of his absorption.

"Who's there?" he called out sharply, his eyes fixed on the door, which was now partially opened inwards.

There came no answer, but the next moment the slender, cloaked figure of a woman slipped in through the aperture. She closed the door hastily behind her, and then stood with her back against it, panting a little.

Maitland sprang to his feet.

"Violet!" he exclaimed. There was no welcome in his voice—only amazement and a harsh note of distaste.

Violet Frayne came swiftly forward.

"Yes, it is I," she said. "Surely"—pausing half-way across the studio to regard him with a species of ironical mirth—"surely you expected I should come?"

"I did not. Why should you?"

"Noel, are you mad? Of course we must talk—arrange things." As she spoke she loosened the fur cloak she was wearing and tossed it on to a chair.

"In that case," he replied grimly, "the first thing to arrange is that you address me by my right name."

She sneered a little.

"Oh, yes, you call yourself Maitland now, don't you?"

"I don't only 'call' myself Maitland, I changed my name legally from Blair Noel Forrest to Blair Maitland. Noel Forrest no longer exists."

Violet nodded. There was a sudden shrewd look of calculation on her charming face.

"I think you were wise," she observed. Then, after

a pause, she went on: "It's a horrible muddle, isn't it? Your being here and wanting to marry Elizabeth? I always hoped we should never meet again."

"I can assure you the hope was mutual."

She glanced up at him with faintly mocking eyes.

"There was a time when you didn't feel like that towards me."

"Yes. And I paid for that time, too, didn't I? Pretty heavily."

He spoke with a hard, bitter implacability, and a momentary look of fear came into her face.

"But you'll keep quiet about it? You won't ever give away that we've met before? . . . That's what I wanted to see you about," she went on rapidly. "We must have a thorough understanding on that point. We met for the first time—this morning, at the Abbey. Is that understood?"

Blair stared at her, contempt deepening in his eyes.

"You're very anxious about it, aren't you?" he said gibingly. This woman had once hurt him so much, when he loved her, that now it gave him a grim satisfaction to feel that it was in his power to hurt her back again. "What would you do—supposing I refused to 'keep quiet,' as you suggest?"

Her face whitened a little.

"Noel——"

"Blair, please."

"Well"—impatiently—"Blair, if you like. You *will* keep silence, won't you? Oh! You couldn't be so cruel as to ruin my life—now, after all these years, after all you did for me in the past."

"You forget—I imagined myself in love with you, then."

"You *were* in love," she returned vehemently. "You did care—once. You can't deny that."

He seemed to reflect.

"Perhaps I did—once," he allowed dispassionately. "Or, at least, I was in love with the woman I thought you were."

"And—and now? Have you no feeling left?"

"For you?" He shook his head. His eyes were hard as flint. "None whatever."

She winced. No woman can hear, unhurt, a man who has once loved her tell her candidly that he no longer cares—tell her in the indifferent, neutral tones which are so much more terribly convincing than any passionate denial.

"Still," she persisted, "for your own sake as well as mine, you'll keep silent?"

"For my sake? What have I to be ashamed of—to conceal?"

"Just what you've concealed all these years," she retorted triumphantly. "Why have you changed your name—if you didn't want to conceal the past?"

"For the reason that I wanted to completely sever that part of my life—the part in which you had a share—from the present. I wanted to start afresh."

"Then, in that case, you'll not want the past raked up—for your own sake, as I said before," She eyed him narrowly. "If Candy knew the truth he would never, never let you marry Elizabeth. I suppose you realise that?"

"I shouldn't have supposed him so narrow-minded as that. In fact——" He gave her back glance for glance, their eyes meeting defiantly, as rapiers clash. "In fact,

I should have thought he'd feel—well, shall we say rather grateful to me?"

"But you forget what happened afterwards——"

"Forget? That's not the kind of thing a man—forgets." There was a concentrated bitterness in his voice—a bitterness so intense, so intrinsic, that it could only have been born of some grim happening of the past which had scored itself deep into the man's very soul.

Even Violet, swayed utterly as she was at the moment by self-interest, could not hear that supremely bitter note unmoved. Her expression changed, softened to something that held a kind of wistful appeal.

"You've never forgiven me, then?" she faltered.

"No, I don't think I have. The thing was outside the limits of forgiveness."

"And are you going to punish me now—to have your revenge by telling Candy?" She clasped her hands, wringing them together with a little despairing gesture that must have melted any but a heart of stone. "Oh, Noel, don't be hard on me! I'm happy, now. Candy loves me, and I—I worship him. You can ruin my whole life if you tell him. Even though you couldn't actually prove what you said—and you couldn't!"—with a flash of sudden defiance—"still, things would never be the same again. And it wouldn't do any good. You couldn't un*do* the past. And—and, after all, nothing of the past matters—to Blair Maitland."

She ceased, her eager eyes fixed entreatingly upon his face while she waited for his answer. Then, as he made no response, she caught at his arm and broke out uncontrollably:

"Tell me what you're going to do! Don't torture me! . . Oh, for God's sake, do *say* something!"

Very quietly but inexorably he loosened her imploring clasp from his arm.

"You're upsetting yourself quite needlessly," he said at last coolly. "I'm going to do—precisely nothing at all. A man doesn't give a thing—and then take it back again. I gave you your freedom—eleven years ago. I've no intention of taking it away again."

"You mean that? Can I trust you?"

"I mean it."

She drew back from him and stood very still for a moment. Then a long, shuddering sigh of intense relief quivered its way between her lips.

"That's—that's decent of you, Noel," she said a little unsteadily. "Thank you." She held out her hand, but he made no effort to take it, and a hot flush stained her face scarlet as she withdrew it hastily. "You won't even shake hands with me?"

He shook his head.

"I'll shake hands with you in public—when the ordinary usage of society makes it necessary—not otherwise."

As he spoke, he picked up the cloak which she had thrown down on to a chair and held it out for her to put on.

"I don't think there is anything more to be said between us," he continued. "We each know now exactly where we stand."

Mechanically she drew the cloak around her, then paused.

"You're very unforgiving," she said slowly.

"Am I?"—indifferently. "Being knocked about a bit hardens one, I suppose."

Still with that same cool indifference of manner he accompanied her to the door and held it open for her as she passed out into the darkness of the winter evening.

CHAPTER XIX

AFTER DINNER

"NOW, don't stay too long exchanging improper stories," commanded Violet gaily, as she rose from the table. "Remember two bored women will be waiting for you to come and amuse them."

Dinner was over at the Abbey, and now, as his wife and daughter left the dining-room together, Candy settled back in his chair for a comfortable smoke and talk with the only guest, Jack Sutherland.

"This takes one back to old times, doesn't it?" he said, after a little while spent in linking up the threads of the past with the present. "You and I yarning away together in the old place."

Sutherland nodded.

"Yes, it takes one back," he assented. "Although the world of to-day and the world before the war seem æons apart. Those four years of the war made a big slice out of life, didn't they?"

"'M, they did that. No one could have gone through them unchanged, I imagine."

"None," replied the doctor thoughtfully. "Some who were never men before, became men, and some who had passed as men until the test came crumpled up."

"I expect you ran across a good many interesting sidelights in the course of your work as a medico," suggested Candy.

"Quite a lot. I met several mother's darlings and a

good few idle young rotters—no vice about 'em, you know, just young fools whose colour-scheme in clothes had hitherto occupied their attention more than anything else—whom risk and hardship and responsibility turned into as fine men as you could wish to meet on a day's march. I learned, too, sometimes of their own initiative, sometimes without their knowledge, the secret history of a good many men who passed through my care." Sutherland paused, then went on with quiet deliberation: "I remember one case that interested me particularly."

Candy pressed out the stub of his cigarette against the ash-tray at his elbow and lit another.

"What was that, then?" he asked.

"It was the case of a man called Private Smithers."

"Smithers? Doesn't sound particularly romantic," commented Frayne, with a laugh.

"No, not by way of a start, does it? But the point is that the man was the last person in the world you'd have suspected of such a commonplace name as 'Smithers' —or of remaining a Tommy. And I know he'd been offered a commission more than once, and refused it. He had breed in every line of him, spoke like a public schoolman, and his record should have earned him the V.C. twice over, if everyone were to come by his own in this world. He appeared to have no sense of danger —or, if he had, then he simply didn't care whether he stopped a bullet or not."

"Well, and what lay behind it all?" asked Candy. "I suppose the young fool had lost his money at racing or fallen in love with his best friend's wife?"

The other shook his head.

"Neither. Though he was cynic enough about women, incidentally. I think he'd had a sickener of them some

time or other. My prettiest nurse, whom most of the men in the ward were crazy over, left him quite cold."

"Then what was at the back of it?"

"Prison," said Sutherland quietly. "He'd been in jail."

Candy uttered an ejaculation of surprise.

"What for—forgery? That's the usual thing in his class."

"No. Common or garden theft. It all came out when he was delirious. He was frightfully badly wounded—in fact, I never thought we should pull him through—and he was off his head for days."

"Did he give the whole show away, then?" asked Frayne curiously.

Before Sutherland's mental vision a picture had formed itself of a narrow bed in a hospital ward, and, lying on it, a haggard, unshaven man from whose eyes the light of reason had temporarily disappeared, babbling excitedly of something that had happened in the past, babbling sometimes with a fierce and bitter fury, sometimes with a grim, ironic sense of humour. "'He who takes what isn't his'n, when he's cotched he's sent to prison'," he chanted. "*You* know that, don't you?"—nodding his head shrewdly at the tall grave-looking doctor at his bedside. "They always make you pay, you know, if you break the law. I paid—oh, by God, I paid!" And the tall, grave doctor, looking across into the compassionate face of the pretty nurse standing on the opposite side of the bed, had said pitifully: "Anyway, the poor chap's wiped that out, ten times over. Wish it didn't worry him so."

"Did he give the whole show away?" The question jerked Sutherland's thoughts back to the present.

"Pretty well. Obviously he'd pinched something while staying at a friend's house—money, I suppose. Pinched it because he was in debt all round. And the friend must have brought a charge against him and got him jailed."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Candy. "What a rotten affair! Sounds rather a blackguard trick—pinching from a friend when you're his guest."

"Nevertheless," said Sutherland steadily, "he made good afterwards, during the war. After all, he may have been badly driven, card and racing debts—'debts of honour' as they're called"—with a contemptuous twist of his mouth. "And possibly he may have taken the money hoping to return it later on. I don't know the details. One's inclined to let him have the benefit of the doubt for the sake of the splendid things he did in the war—rather inclined to say: 'Neither do I condemn thee.'" He paused hesitatingly, looking across at Candy with a curiously tense interrogation in his eyes.

"Yes, you're right, Jack." Frayne spoke with a quiet, kindly tolerance. "A chap like that should be given a fresh deal, I think."

An expression of relief showed itself in the doctor's face.

"I think so, too. He sinned and he paid—and that debt's wiped out."

"Quite," assented Candy. "Of course, Smithers was an assumed name. Wonder what the poor devil's real name was? It's odd, isn't it, to think one might run up against him without even knowing it."

"Yes, you might," said Sutherland. "In fact——" There was an infinitesimal pause, then he went on steadily: "In fact, you *have* done."

"I have?" Candy looked leisurely interested. "Have I really? Where, then?"

"The man's name is Maitland—Blair Maitland."

The wine-glass Frayne was holding fell with a little crash on to the table, the red wine it held streaming out across the polished surface like spilled blood.

"What did you say? Maitland? *Maitland?* . . . D'you mean that, Jack?"

"Yes."

Candy sprang to his feet.

"God in heaven!" he exclaimed. "And I was going to let him marry Elizabeth! The scoundrel! The unmitigated blackguard! It must be stopped, of course—at once—the engagement——" He made as though to leave the room in search of Maitland then and there. Sutherland caught him by the arm.

"Stop, stop, Candy! Steady on. You must think it over——"

"Think it over!" The molten scorn in those three words told Sutherland that any hope for Maitland was damned from the outset. He had put the case forward as the story of an unnamed man, palliating the offence as much as he could, and anxious to see how Frayne would receive it, and when the latter had taken it so broad-mindedly, with such apparent tolerant understanding, he had ventured to tell him the truth regarding the man's identity.

But, poor human nature being what it is, the compassionate tolerance accorded to an abstract instance is apt to change into undiluted condemnation when the case in point turns out to be such that it closely impinges on one's own life, and Doctor Jack realised that his old friend's magnanimous attitude towards the sins of a con-

jectural and nebulous Smithers was a very different thing from his attitude towards the sins of an actual and material Maitland. A glance at Candy's face showed it white with anger, his nostrils—those proud, sensitive, clear-cut nostrils—curiously dilated, while his slate-grey eyes were ablaze with a terrible light of sheer, implacable wrath.

"Think it over!" he repeated, his usually pleasant voice harshened out of all recognition. "There's nothing to think over, Jack. My daughter doesn't marry a common thief."

"Put like that, no one could do otherwise than agree with you," said Sutherland temperately. "But, put it another way: Here you've a man who committed a sin in the days of his youth—a particularly nasty and sneaky type of sin, if you like—but who has been punished for it, paid the price in an actual prison, and has since then proved himself a brave man in the war——"

"Physical courage only!" interrupted Candy. "Dozens of blackguards have that."

"And who, since the war," pursued the other, disregarding the interruption, "has built himself up a new and decent life. Put the case like that, and have you still the right to say he's utterly unfit to marry Elizabeth?"

"Certainly I have," returned Candy violently. "Why, the man wasn't even a decent thief—he stole from his friends, trading on the immunity from suspicion which he would have as their guest."

"It must have been at least ten or eleven years ago," submitted Sutherland. "Lots of people make bad mistakes when they're young."

"I grant that," replied Frayne swiftly. "But they don't do dirty, low-down, caddish tricks of that descrip-

tion. Once a cad, always a cad. It's in the blood, and though it mayn't show for years, if there's no provocative cause, it'll come out again whenever a man's in a tight corner. . . . I swear to you, Jack, if you'd told me that Maitland had led a gang of cracksmen, or held up a bank—and now forsworn the life—I could have tolerated it better. At least, then, he would have been an open and honest enemy of society, taking his risks along with his plunder. But to steal—from friends! The swine! . . . Well, as I said before, that ends it. I trust Elizabeth with no man of that type. Nor do I propose to accept a convicted thief as a member of my family. No Frayne has ever yet married a jail-bird, and they're not going to begin now." He made as though to leave the room. "You go and talk to Violet and Elizabeth. I'm going into the library to write Maitland at once."

"Don't write. At least, see him," suggested Sutherland, "and hear what he has to say. After all, we're only going on the ramblings of a man in delirium—not very reliable evidence on which to smash up his life——"

"I don't care a damn about his life!"

"To smash up his life," reiterated the doctor quietly, "and Elizabeth's. Don't forget that, Candy. You smash Elizabeth's life as well."

"She'll get over it. She's a Frayne, with all the Frayne pride. When she knows the truth, you won't find Elizabeth wanting to marry a man who's got about as much sense of honour as a pariah dog!"

"'When she knows the truth.' That's just it," persisted Sutherland patiently. "We don't *know* the truth yet. We only surmise it. See the man and find out what the actual truth is—all the circumstances of the case. . . . You may be as angry as you like, Candy, but you've got

to play the game and give Maitland a fair hearing."

While the doctor had been speaking, Frayne's expression had slowly altered. The passionate fury had died out of it, and a grave, judicial decision taken its place.

"Very good," he said. "I'll play the game. I'll see Maitland to-morrow morning and investigate the whole matter. And if what we surmise proves to be the truth, then that ends everything; he'll never set foot inside the Abbey gates again. If, on the other hand, there are any mitigating circumstances—well, they shall be taken into consideration. . . . Now, we'd better join my wife and Elizabeth in the other room. I hope "—with a grim little smile—"you're capable of play-acting 'for one night only,' Jack? I don't want either of them worried about this business before they need be. It'll have to be a case of 'Let's pretend,' for the rest of this evening."

Sutherland dropped a friendly hand on the other's shoulder.

"I'll back you up, old chap," he said quietly.

And when the two men rejoined the ladies, no one could have guessed from their demeanour that they were both burdened with a heavy sense of misgiving and anxiety.

"Come along and amuse us." Violet welcomed them with one of her most charming smiles. "We began to think you were going to desert us for the whole evening! Were the stories so *very* good?" she added mischievously.

"Very," lied Sutherland. And then almost laughed out loud at the grim little ironies of life.

CHAPTER XX

"NOR ALL YOUR TEARS——"

"WHAT have you to say to all this?" Briefly Candy had epitomised the story he had heard from Sutherland, and now he fired his question at Maitland like a pistol-shot. "What have you to say to all this? Is it true?"

While he had been speaking, Blair's face had undergone a curious change of expression. At first he had appeared blankly aghast—stunned by the unexpectedness of the accusation. Then, as realisation of the full import of what Frayne was saying seemed to come to him, his face hardened slowly into an impenetrable mask.

"I'm afraid I can't deny it."

"Then it's true—true that you stole a sum of money from friends under whose roof you were a guest at the moment?"

Blair's mouth twisted into an ugly smile.

"Not an actual sum of money," he replied. "You haven't got your facts quite correctly."

"Then perhaps you will enlighten me," rejoined the other grimly. "I'm right in thinking that you've been in prison?"

"Quite right."

"And the charge?"

"Charged with stealing a string of pearls."

"Oh, I see." Candy sneered. "You stole in kind, not cash."

Maitland made a slight, mocking bow.

"Pearls are easily turned into cash," he suggested flippantly.

The older man eyed him with contemptuous anger. If he had nourished any indulgent thoughts towards him, prompted by Sutherland's own attitude in the matter, they speedily vanished before the proud indifference of Blair's manner. Why, the man appeared to have no shame at all over the affair—to be utterly defiant and impatient!

"And you, a convicted thief—convicted of the dirtiest type of thieving, too!—have had the audacity, the—the consummate impudence to ask my daughter to be your wife!" Candy almost stammered in his white-hot fury.

Blair's mouth twitched a little, as though at a sudden stab of pain.

"Yes," he acknowledged, "I had." Adding suddenly: "I was very young when all that past history took place, and I suppose I'd begun to think a man could build afresh. . . . I was wrong, it seems."

Something in the simplicity of the speech tempered the heat of Candy's wrath. He regarded the other man curiously.

"Look here," he said abruptly, his natural kindliness of disposition triumphing for a moment over inherited pride and righteous anger. "Look here, were there any excuses to be made for you? Were you being pressed by creditors at the time?"

Maitland nodded curtly.

"I most certainly was. I was up to the neck in debts—cards, racing, and the usual ubiquitous tailors' bills. That told against me, of course."

"And your people—couldn't they have done anything to get you out of the mess?"

"I was caught with the pearls on me," said Blair. "As the owner of the pearls chose to prosecute, there was nothing to be done—except what my people did do."

"What was that?"

"Disowned me"—briefly.

"Don't blame them." Candy had visualised the matter anew, and once more his scorn and anger and insulted pride overrode any sympathy which the tragedy of the whole thing might have evoked in him. "And having been disowned by your own family, you propose to attach yourself to mine! Well, understand this: Your engagement to my daughter ceases here and now, and henceforth Frayne Abbey is closed to you. There may have been excuses, mitigations for what you did, you may have run straight since, for all I know to the contrary, but the bedrock fact remains—you've been in jail. And no man is going to see his daughter married to a jail-bird if he can save her from it."

"No, I suppose not." Blair stared out of the window. His face was profoundly expressionless, but a curious grey shade had painted itself about his mouth.

There fell a silence. Presently he turned to Candy and asked a question.

"There's only one thing I'd like to know," he said slowly. "How did you come by all this information? You seem to have got my *dossier* fairly complete."

Frayne hesitated a moment. Then he answered:

"That's a fair question. Sutherland told me. Not willingly, I assure you. But he's an old friend, and he felt that as far as he and I were concerned it was only

playing the game. . . . But that's a thing you'd hardly understand."

Blair jerked his head up as though a whip had stung him. For a moment he looked as if he were going to strike the other man for his bitter sneer. His eyes blazed. Then, all at once, the fire died out and he said quietly :

"Perhaps I understand better than you imagine." He paused, his brows knitting thoughtfully. "But Sutherland? . . . Sutherland? I can't quite place his knowledge of my early history."

"You supplied it yourself," said Candy. "At least, enough for us to guess the rest. You were—delirious, you know, when you were in hospital."

Blair uttered a sharp ejaculation. He comprehended, now, exactly what had happened.

"I seem to have dug my own grave pretty well," he remarked dryly. "There's a certain element of humour in the situation, isn't there?"

"I'm glad you can find it," retorted Frayne. Then, getting up as though to put an end to the interview, he went on: "I'm sorry about it, Maitland. You're a man I could have liked, made a friend of, in other circumstances. But I can't forgive you for daring to think Elizabeth—for wanting to drag any woman into the mess you've made of your life. Cover your tracks as much as you may, change your name half a dozen times—you can't ever cut loose from a past such as yours. The truth may spring to light at any moment. . . . Good God, man! You profess to love Elizabeth, and yet you would have let her run the risk of the sheer hell which discovery would have meant—the hell of finding herself singled out, ostracised as the wife of a convicted thief ! It's incredible, monstrous!"

Maitland bent his head.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I was wrong—I see it now—wrong to suppose the past can ever be completely wiped out. . . . Well, that's over. You're quite right—you've acted precisely as I expect I should have acted myself in similar circumstances. I shan't trouble you again. You will—explain to Elizabeth?"

"I will explain," answered Frayne gravely. Now that his purpose was accomplished and Elizabeth saved from a marriage which could only have ended in terrible disaster, he was able to feel compassion for the man whose whole life's happiness had been shattered during the last few minutes. He had taken it well, too—taken it as a man should take one of fate's hammer-blows, unflinchingly, without whining or weak protest. And as Frayne stood at the window and watched the tall, lithe figure march away down the long straight avenue of elms, he acknowledged to himself that, thief or not, Blair Maitland was at least a brave man.

"I don't believe it!"

Passionately the denial sprang from Elizabeth's lips. Very gently and pitifully, suppressing as much as possible his own almost uncontrollable indignation, her father had summarized the damning facts concerning the man she loved, winding up with a kindly, but authoritative: "So you see, kiddy, you must dismiss him from your mind. There can be no such thing as an engagement between you and a man who has been imprisoned for theft."

"I don't believe a word of it!" she reiterated. "Do you really think for a moment that Blair would steal—steal a pearl necklace! Why, it's too absurd!"

"Absurd and far-fetched as it may sound, it's the truth.

He has acknowledged it himself—in those days he had not yet inherited his present fortune, remember—and has also acknowledged his unfitness to marry you."

Elizabeth's wide-apart grey eyes flashed open challenge. "You forced him to that!"

Candy nodded.

"I *should* have forced him, if it had been necessary. But it wasn't. He had the decency to see it for himself. . . . I'm sorry, kiddy, I can't tell you how sorry I am." He stretched his hand out sympathetically to clasp her own, but she took no notice of the gesture.

"I don't think you are, really," she said slowly, her lip curling. "Actually, I believe you're glad—glad of the excuse to try and separate us, to try and put an end to my engagement. Oh, Candy?"—with a sudden gust of passionate reproach—"I wouldn't have believed it of you!"

Frayne's eyes flashed. With his nerves frayed raw by what he mentally termed "the whole beastly business," his heart torn by the necessity for hurting his beloved Elizabeth, the accusation she flung at him was more than he could endure.

"How dare you?" he exclaimed, swept by a veritable tempest of anger. "How dare you even think such a thing? I tell you, Maitland is a thief—a thief and a jail-bird, and he deserves a thundering good hiding for his damned impertinence in ever speaking to you, the blackguard!"

But Elizabeth was possessed of every bit as imperious a temper as Frayne himself.

"You forget he once saved my life!" she threw back hotly. "I suppose, being a thief, and a jail-bird, and a

blackguard"—she accentuated each epithet with a scorn that matched her father's—"he ought to have stood humbly on one side and allowed me to drown—rather than pollute me with his touch!"

"Don't talk like a fool!" retorted Candy savagely "Saving a woman from death and marrying her are two very different things."

"I'm *not* talking like a fool. I'm simply carrying out your ridiculous ideas to their logical conclusion."

"Logical! As though any woman was ever logical!"

"Well, if I'm not logical, I'm at least just. It wouldn't be *just* to punish a man all the rest of his life for a single sin. Besides"—superbly—"I don't believe he did it. I shall never believe it—unless he tells me so with his own lips. . . . Blair a thief! I think you must be mad even to dream of such a thing. You've misunderstood him."

"Ask him yourself, then!"

"I will. I'll go to Lone Edge, now at once, and ask him."

Candy's eyes narrowed.

"And if he acknowledges it? Are you prepared to obey me then, and give him up?" he asked.

Elizabeth wavered a moment. There was a dread sense of conviction in her father's swiftly uttered question. Then her belief in Maitland reasserted itself triumphantly.

"There's not much object in discussing that, is there? Blair *isn't* a thief," she asserted.

The last shred of Candy's self-control deserted him.

"Ask him, then! Go and find out for yourself," he said furiously.

Her head went up defiantly.

"I will. And when I've had his answer, perhaps you'll

be prepared to apologise to him—and to me—for making such an abominable accusation against him."

"Certainly I will," returned Frayne grimly. And for the first time in their lives he and Elizabeth parted in anger.

CHAPTER XXI

GOOD-BYE

TWENTY minutes later Elizabeth was rapping on the studio door. She had urged her chauffeur into sending the car along as fast as he dared, and finally, bidding him pull to a standstill part way up the Lone Edge drive, she crossed the gardens on foot. Somehow she felt sure that, after what must have been the strain and horror of his interview with Candy, Blair would have secluded himself in the fastness of his studio, where his servants were forbidden to break in upon him unsummoned.

Nor was she wrong. He was there, alone, and something in the ravaged face he turned towards her as she entered stabbed her with a sudden overwhelming dread.

"Blair—Blair——" She almost ran towards him. No thought or word of greeting entered her mind. She was intent only on one thing—on hearing his beloved voice refute the terrible accusation which had been brought against him. "Blair, say it isn't true! Deny it at once—at once, do you hear?"

His arms, which had instinctively opened as though to take her within their embrace, dropped suddenly to his sides.

"Deny—what?" he asked. His voice was flat and toneless.

"Why, you know—you must know—you've seen Candy this morning. And he says—he told me——"

"Yes? What did he tell you?"

"Oh, Blair. I can't say it—it sounds too horrible—too absurd. He—he said that—that you had once been put in prison—for stealing!" The words came out in a little breathless rush. After them—silence, a stark, terrible silence, while Elizabeth stood with parted lips, her slight young breast rising and falling unevenly, waiting for his denial—waiting for a denial that never came.

"Blair!" Her voice sharpened a little. "Did you hear me? Did you understand?" Something of terror—the terror which her dogged belief in the man she loved had been keeping at bay all this time—sounded in the quickening shrillness of her tone.

At last he answered her.

"Yes, I understand," he said quietly. "Nor am I able to deny what your father told you."

Her face changed—whitened. For the first time the idea that there might be some grain of truth in the statement Frayne had made took definite form in her mind.

"You mean—you mean——" she faltered. "You don't—you *can't* mean that it's true, Blair? True—that you stole—some pearls, and were put in prison?"

"It is quite true that I was in prison—and for stealing a pearl necklace."

In the sickening silence which followed the words reiterated through Elizabeth's brain, at first a mere meaningless jumble of horror, but growing by degrees clearer and clearer until at last they crystallised into irrefutable and terrible significance. . . . It was true, then—true! . . . For a moment the studio seemed to swim round her, rocking unsteadily, while a thick grey mist came rolling up in waves about her until she could only discern Blair's figure as a tall blurred shadow in the gathering darkness.

Then, slowly, the mist cleared away, the swinging studio steadied gradually to normal, and she came back to a bleak and desperate realisation of the truth. Involuntarily she drew away from the man standing so rigidly beside her.

"Then you've been living a lie," she said slowly, the words seeming almost to be forced through her lips, so difficultly did they come.

Maitland bent his head in assent.

"It would appear so," he answered shortly.

"You've deceived me—utterly, all this time. Oh, Blair!"—his name broke from her like a cry. "If you'd only told me—trusted me! . . . I could have forgiven it all."

His eyes flashed a curious look of surprise at her.

"You could have forgiven my being—a thief?" he said.

"Yes, even that. Because"—desolately—"I loved you so."

"And now? You don't love me any longer, I suppose? Is that it?"

"Oh, yes, I love you. I suppose," she went on tonelessly, "I shall always love you. I can't help that."

He made an impetuous, eager step towards her.

"Then why—why can't you forgive me? . . . God knows I've repented that mad act of mine bitterly enough!"

"I'm sure of it," she answered gently. "And I don't believe that anyone should be made to pay over and over again—all their lives—for just one sin. I never have thought that."

"Then why——" he broke in swiftly, but she continued as though she hadn't heard him.

"I can forgive—I *could* have forgiven—what you did all those years ago. But, don't you see, what I *can't* forgive is that you never told me—never trusted me. . . . That was a sin against our love."

He gazed at her in silence, slowly coming to a perception of her envisagement of the whole matter.

"So it's all over." The words fell from her with a sad kind of finality.

"Need it be? Elizabeth, need it be? If you can forgive——"

"But I can't!" she broke out hardly. "I wish to God I could!" She twisted her hands together painfully. "Don't you see, if I'd only known, if you'd only told me I could have stood by you, told Candy I didn't care about the past—that I trusted you. . . . Can I say—or feel—that now? When you've deceived me, left me in ignorance of what my love for you gave me the *right* to know."

"No," he acknowledged. "I suppose you can't."

"You took that from me. You've taken everything from me—my belief in you, your own trust in me. All the time, it wasn't there. I only imagined it to be. You *didn't* trust me."

As the tired, tearless voice ceased speaking, the man's own bitterness welled to the surface.

"I seem to have made about as big a hash of things as a man well could."

"Yes," she assented dully. "I think you have." For a moment she stood very still, her head bent. Presently, lifting her eyes to his face, she went on: "I don't think there's anything else to say, Blair, except, just—good-bye." Her voice broke a little on the last word.

Blindly she turned and walked towards the door. He made a sudden, impulsive movement as though to hold her back, then, as if recognising the uselessness of it, he stood aside, watching her go with hard, impenetrable eyes.

CHAPTER XXII

VARIOUS OPINIONS

CANDY was more troubled than he cared to admit. A week had gone by since the day Elizabeth's engagement had been summarily ended, and with each day's passing it seemed to him that she drifted further away from him, shutting herself up in a sad little world of her own thoughts—a world in which, inevitably, he could have no part.

She had returned from her impulsive visit to Lone Edge changed in some curious fashion which he could not fathom. Quite quietly, with a funny, cold self-possession that was as unlike her usual spontaneity as it could possibly be, she had told him he had been right in all that he had affirmed about Blair and that she had broken off her engagement. And from that day onwards she had declined to discuss the matter further. More than once Candy had attempted to break through her guard of reticence, but without success. She had only regarded him out of grave, tearless eyes and told him that she "did not want to talk about it."

"My engagement is ended, so there's nothing more to be said," was all his utmost endeavour could elicit. And, wretchedly enough, he realised that here was a grief in which she either could not, or would not, let him share. For the first time in her life she was keeping him inexorably out of her confidence. And it hurt—hurt like blazes.

Violet, on the other hand, seemed to have drawn closer

to him by reason of the shadow which had fallen so suddenly across life at the Abbey. She appeared immensely relieved at Maitland's stoical acceptance of the fact that, since that unfortunate episode of his past life had come to light, there could be no possibility of an engagement between himself and Elizabeth.

"I was so afraid he might try to get round it in some way," she told Candy. "Or perhaps try to force your hand."

"Force my hand?" returned Frayne grimly. "How could he do that? Why, the fellow hasn't got a leg to stand on."

"Oh, I don't know *how* he could do it," she responded. "But people who've done things"—vaguely—"are very unscrupulous, sometimes, aren't they? Don't they call it—blackmailing?"

Candy laughed.

"You needn't trouble your dear little head about blackmail," he said reassuringly. "A man who gets to jail for stealing isn't exactly in the position to blackmail anyone."

"Oh, well he might have tried to *insist* on our letting him marry Elizabeth," she explained. "That's the kind of thing I meant."

Frayne stared at her in amused surprise.

"But how could he, darling? As I said, he isn't in a position to 'insist' upon anything. Blackmail usually means that someone knows something about you to your detriment—or something which you particularly don't want the world at large to know, and then holds his knowledge over you as a threat to make you pay in cash —or else to force you to give way to him in some special matter."

"I know—I know." Violet spoke a trifle unevenly. "That's just what I meant."

"Well, you foolish dear, in this case it isn't Maitland who knows something to my detriment—or yours. It's we who know something to his."

"Yes. It's very sad, isn't it?" Her lip quivered. "I feel so terribly sorry about it all—so sorry for Elizabeth. I do wish it was possible to put things right. . . . But, of course, it isn't."

He was touched by the note of regret in her tones—it held the unmistakable ring of truth. For all her selfishness and shallowness, Violet could quite realise the tragedy of heartbreak which was being enacted under her eyes, and as much as in her lay she was genuinely sorry for Elizabeth. So she wept a little, and Candy comforted her, inwardly marvelling all over again, as he had done so often before, at the wonderful sweetness and tenderness of the woman whom fate had sent to mend his broken life.

"Candy, don't let's tell anyone about—about Mr. Maitland," she said presently, drying her eyes. "I think we might at least keep the whole matter secret."

He nodded.

"I quite agree. Outside ourselves, and old Jack, and the Wentworths, no one has heard of this engagement of Elizabeth's. And no one ever need hear."

Jack Sutherland himself was miserably concerned over the consequences of his communicating Maitland's past to Frayne. He was too fond of Elizabeth to witness the suffering it had entailed upon her without brooding unhappily upon the fact that it was his hand which had struck the initial blow at her happiness.

"And yet," as he told Jane and Colin one day, when

the three of them were discussing the matter together, "and yet I couldn't *not* have told him. You saw that yourself, Jane, when I put a hypothetical case to you—do you remember?"

"I remember," she replied. "And in spite of the unhappiness it's caused, if you put the question to me all over again, I should still say the same. You had no choice but to tell Candy the truth."

Colin's foot tapped the floor impatiently.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, with an irritable note in his voice, born of repressed suffering. "It might have been better to let sleeping dogs lie. At least, Elizabeth would have been happier so."

"Except that things like that are almost certain to come out some time or other," answered Sutherland. "And if Elizabeth had made the discovery *after* marriage, I can imagine no more terrible smash-up of her happiness. And the mere fact that Maitland had kept the whole affair secret from her would have made matters ten times worse."

"What I never understood," said Jane, "is why you told me that you knew nothing against him—that morning in the dairy when I asked you point-blank if you did." She glanced across at the doctor, in her eyes the puzzled doubt which had been troubling her mind for days.

He smiled a little.

"I didn't say I 'knew nothing.' I said I couldn't tell you anything against him. I know it was a subterfuge—but I didn't want you to be worried before it was really necessary."

The bewilderment died out of Jane's eyes, to be replaced by a very tender light of comprehension.

"It was a very kindly subterfuge," she said gently.

"You see," added Sutherland, "there was just the possibility that you might never need to be worried at all about the matter. If dear old Candy could only have looked at the facts when they applied to his prospective son-in-law as broadmindedly as he did in the first instance, when he thought they merely related to some man I knew who meant nothing at all to him—why, everything would have been plain sailing and everybody happy."

"A contingency that doesn't occur very frequently in this world," observed Colin. With which cynical summing up neither of the others felt at the moment any hesitation in agreeing.

Each of them was conscious of a passionate loyalty and sympathy for Elizabeth. She had been so fair—playing the game as few women would have done in like circumstances. Even for Sutherland she had no word of blame or rebuke.

"Dear old Jack," she said, when he had tried blunderingly to explain to her how much against the grain it had been for him to do what he had done. "You needn't worry yourself over that. You were Candy's pal, and I don't see how you could have acted in any other way. It was the only square thing for you to do. I don't like you any the less for it," she had added, with a rather wan little smile.

"Thank God for that," said Sutherland. "Personally, I should have quite understood if you'd felt like braining me for the whole horrible business."

"No, I don't feel in the least like that. You see"—speaking with a slight effort—"I can't help knowing that really the fault is solely Blair's. If he'd trusted me enough in the beginning to tell me all about it, I think

we shouldn't have lost our happiness. I could have forgiven him what he did—if you love people you can forgive them most things—and I know I could have made Candy see it all in quite a different light from how he looks at it now. But, you see, Blair didn't trust me." She spoke very simply and sadly, and Jack went away filled with a kind of awed wonder at some women's capacity for loving and understanding and forgiving, and with a healthy, masculine desire to kick a few good people —himself and Frayne and Maitland amongst them.

Colin's attitude in the matter had been characteristic. Life had hurt him so immeasurably that he had an almost uncanny comprehension of its power to hurt others, and it was no easy matter for him to stand silently by and watch the woman he loved going through the same purgatory of torment which he himself had suffered. One day the sight of her small, pale, frozen face, with its curiously withdrawn expression—as though her thoughts were all the time turned inward—drove him into reckless, passionate speech.

"I wish to God you'd let me look after you—try to make up a bit, Elizabeth!" he burst out uncontrollably. "If you'd only marry me—give me the right to try and keep everything that hurts away from you—I'd ask for nothing else on earth!"

She shook her head, smiling a little—that same faint, tolerant ghost of a smile which had so wrung Doctor Jack's heart.

"Only, don't you see, Colin, that's just what you couldn't do—keep away the things that hurt," she said. "It's dear of you to want to, and you mustn't think"—laying an impulsive, friendly little hand on his arm—"that I'm not grateful to you. But there are some things

in which we can't help each other, however much we wish to."

So Colin went back to Brownleaves, fumingly conscious of his own impotence, and poured out the bitterness of his soul to Jane.

"She seems to me so horribly alone just now," he protested savagely. "At the moment she and Frayne can't possibly be the pals they used to be to each other. It wouldn't be natural if they were. And as for that, shallow, spoilt wife of his, she isn't the type of woman who could have the faintest comprehension of what a nature like Elizabeth's is going through. . . . As far as Elizabeth is concerned, the whole atmosphere at home must be utterly uncongenial at present."

Jane nodded.

"Yes, you're quite right," she agreed. She relapsed into a reflective silence for a few moments, then spoke with a sudden decisive note in her voice: "I think I've an idea, Colin. Leave it to me, and I'll see what I can do."

What Jane did was to get out the two-seater and drive across to the Abbey that same afternoon. She found Elizabeth in her own particular sanctum—a small sitting-room which opened off her bedroom. Here a bright fire was burning cheerily on the hearth, casting glancing lights and shadows on the silken hangings, and keeping at bay with its cosy glow the dreariness of the December afternoon. But Elizabeth had turned her back on the firelight and was standing at the window, staring out over the park, where, beneath leaden skies, the dry, pinched grass and leafless trees withered in the relentless grip of winter.

She started violently as, receiving no answer to her

gentle knock, repeated several times, Jane opened the door and looked in.

"Oh, how you startled me!" exclaimed Elizabeth, turning round rather nervously to greet her.

"I'm so sorry," replied Jane, kissing her. "You must have been very deep in thought, as I rapped on the door two or three times."

The girl passed her hand wearily across her forehead.

"I suppose I must have been; I never heard you. You'll have some tea, won't you? Shall we have it up here—or downstairs? We shall find Candy and Violet somewhere about if we go down."

"As I came principally to see you, let's have it up here," suggested Jane.

She chatted on upon different topics until they had had tea, and then, without any preliminary skirmishing, went straight to the point. Somehow the girl must be roused from this dreadful apathy which had laid hold of her.

"Elizabeth," she said, "you're brooding over things too much."

"I can't help it." Elizabeth spoke in a curiously flat, level tone, and inwardly Jane's heart ached for the old gay note which seemed to have gone out of her voice for ever. "I don't seem able to think of—of ordinary every-day things. It's as if, somehow, everything had stopped —just stopped."

"I know. It was bound to feel like that at first. But, you know, things don't stop—at your age. They go on and you've got to pick up the threads again." Jane spoke very gently. She knew so well what that "picking up the threads again" meant after Fate has delivered one of her most stunning blows. Eight years ago, when the telegram had come from the War Office telling her

that Dick Fenton was killed, it had seemed to her, too, as though everything had stopped. "Tell me," she went on, "have you seen Blair—since?"

The girl gave a little involuntary shiver.

"No," she said. "I think he's gone away. At least, Candy said so."

"The best thing he could do," commented Jane. She felt very sore against Maitland for thrusting himself into Elizabeth's life only to spoil it. "It should be easier for you if he's gone—now that there's no danger of meeting him accidentally."

"Yes," agreed Elizabeth indifferently.

"And you *must* take a grip of things again. Don't let go. . . . Don't think I'm being unsympathetic, dear old girl, or that I don't understand. I do." She faltered a little, then went on bravely: "Even for me, life has still been worth living, although I know just what it is to lose the person one loves best in the whole world——"

"Ah! But differently!" broke out Elizabeth. It was as though the older woman had laid her finger on a raw place, and the pain of it had roused her out of a drugged impassivity into vital, protesting life. "But differently! You lost Dick—splendidly. There was something to hold on to—afterwards."

Jane was silent. In a flash she realised that the most torturing part of the anguish Elizabeth had been enduring was that *everything* had been torn away from her—she had not even a beautiful memory to cling to. And daily, hourly she was being thrown back upon her own thoughts. Candy's intense anger against Maitland almost submerged his sympathy for his daughter and anyone as sensitive as Elizabeth was bound to be perfectly aware of this and, in consequence, shrink farther and farther

back into her shell, while a woman possessed of as light and volatile a disposition as Violet must needs be a constant source of nerve irritation to any terribly bruised spirit, struggling to readjust itself. In a moment Jane's decision was taken.

"How would you like to leave all this"—her gesture embraced the Abbey and its immediate surroundings—"and come over to us at Brownleaves for a week or two? Would it make things any—easier?"

The light that sprang into Elizabeth's sad eyes was sufficient answer.

"Oh, Jane, could I?" she exclaimed. "It's rather dreadful at home just now—meal-times and so on. Candy tries so obviously to distract my thoughts and to be bright and kind—like you are to a child with toothache, you know"—smiling faintly. "And all the time he's really longing to say things about Blair and has to keep them in on my account. While Violet gushes over me—I hate it."

"That settles it, then," said Jane firmly. "You come to Brownleaves. Pack up a suit-case now, while I go and fix things with Candy, and then I'll drive you straight back home with me."

Eventually Jane fixed "things" with Frayne, but not without a good deal of protest on his part.

"Let her come to me over Christmas, Candy," she said. "It won't be a very happy Christmas for the poor child, in any case, but I think she'll be better with me than with you."

"That's frank, anyway," he returned. "My only objection is that I've hardly got Elizabeth back before you're trying to take her away from me again."

"You haven't got her back," answered Jane calmly.

"Just now, Elizabeth is farther away from you than she's ever been. And you know it."

"Yes," admitted Candy with troubled eyes. Adding irritably: "And curse that fellow for coming between us!"

"He hasn't, really. It's only that, in the circumstances, you and Elizabeth are looking at the whole affair from different angles. You're bound to—that's what's really hurting her. And the longer you remain together the more you grate on each other—and will do until her first soreness against you has begun to heal."

"Perhaps you're right," he yielded at last. "Have your own way. You generally do, you know," he went on, smiling a little. "And I won't say that it isn't generally a wise way."

So an hour later saw Jane and Elizabeth speeding back to Brownleaves in the two-seater—Elizabeth inwardly wondering how it was that she could leave her beloved Candy with so little of the tempestuous regret which had hitherto been wont to overwhelm her when they parted. Discount it as she might, the fact remained that she was aware of a queer sense of relief as the car rapidly lessened the distance betwixt her and the Abbey. The consciousness of Candy's bitter attitude towards the man she loved had been a perpetual source of irritation, dividing them in spirit, and all at once her thoughts slipped back to that day on Lake Como when, without rhyme or reason, a sense of foreboding had descended on her—a vague premonition that never again would she and Candy meet with the old complete understanding of each other—never draw quite so close together again.

"Whither thou goest, I will go . . . thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." Ruth's utter al-

legiance to the man she loved is the allegiance of all women who love, and deep down in her heart beneath all the grief and pain and hurt which he had dealt her, Elizabeth's inner loyalty to Blair, unrecognised even by herself, remained untouched and undestroyed—a loyalty which could not endure that anyone, even Candy, should condemn him utterly.

CHAPTER XXIII

FAITH TRIUMPHANT

CHRISTMAS was over, and with the early days of the new year it seemed as though fresh thoughts were springing to life in Elizabeth's mind—pushing their way through the hardened, arid convictions which had lain like iron on her heart just as, with the coming of spring, the tender, hesitant new shoots of winterbound plants begin to push their way up through the earth.

The quiet weeks at Brownleaves—free from irritation, imbued with the silent, uncriticising sympathy of friends—had done their work in restoring her to a more balanced frame of mind. The actual shock of learning that Blair had deceived her and of the subsequent breaking-off of her engagement was over now, and, with the gradual passing of the first wild sense of blind recoil which had followed, she was struggling slowly back to a broader and more tolerant outlook.

The thing which had hurt her most was what seemed to her Blair's utter lack of trust in her. If he had only told her the truth himself, she knew she could have forgiven his actual crime—even though it was a mean, contemptible type of crime that filled her with a kind of sick revulsion. But, at least, it had happened years ago, when he could not have been much more than a boy, and had been driven by heaven knows what pressure of debt and difficulty. Possibly he had acted on impulse—an impulse which, a moment later, he would have given

years of his life to recall—and then the heavy hand of the law had descended on him and put all possibility of rehabilitation out of his power.

But he should have told her—that thought reiterated through her mind. Why hadn't he? Was it—the idea flashed into her weary, puzzled brain almost like an inspiration—was it because, having once assured her that he had never done anythng he was ashamed of, he had, as it were, locked the door upon confession? And yet he had answered that question of hers so simply and frankly that it was almost impossible to believe that he had been lying. His eyes—those curiously blue eyes of his—had met hers as he spoke with a sheer, crystalline directness.

Snatches of their conversation together on that long-ago day at the Villa Felice came back to her. *"I can't agree with you that 'other people' don't count,"* he had said. *"They're the actual dispensers of heaven and hell."* And again: *"You can win through anything and come out on the other side—though perhaps with an oddly enlightened opinion as to the due rewards of virtue and vice."* What had he meant? Could he have meant that somehow justice had gone astray? Like a searchlight, suddenly illuminating dense darkness, the thought leapt to life in her mind. If this were true, then it would explain everything—both the reason why he had not told her anything about the matter and his inability to refute the charge when Candy had accused him. He had not told her simply because he had not been guilty of any crime, yet, since he had been actually imprisoned for theft, he could not deny the fact when Frayne challenged him with it.

Elizabeth knew that, though rare, such things did sometimes occur as that people were wrongfully imprisoned—

miscarriages of justice they were called. And gradually, as her trust in Blair reasserted itself—that bedrock belief and trust which is a concomitant part of love—the conviction grew upon her that herein lay the explanation of all that had been so difficult of comprehension—difficult, because whatever other faults he might possess, no one, without proof, would ever have dreamed of accusing Maitland of a crime involving meanness and cowardice and dishonour.

The only thing that puzzled her was why he had not attempted to explain matters to Candy—told him frankly that justice had miscarried. Was it pride? A rigid, concrete pride which could not brook suspicion? She knew that proud, independent, dominating spirit of his—even in the midst of the rush of penitence and remorse which overwhelmed her she could not help smiling a little at the very idea of Blair, stung to fury by her father's facile acceptance of his guilt, deigning to justify himself. She could quite imagine him marching out of Candy's presence, stiff-neckedly refusing to contradict a single word of the accusation levelled at him.

And yet—and yet—— For her sake, for the sake of his love for her, he would surely have sunk his pride sufficiently to straighten matters out! . . . Unless there were something more behind—some special reason. . . . Elizabeth's mind, working ceaselessly on the problem, pushing onward step by step, spurred by the love that longed to justify her lover, lit at last upon a possible solution of the riddle. He must be shielding someone else.

The more she thought of it the more convinced she became that this was the truth which lay behind his silence—behind his stoical acceptance of disgrace. It

was the only conceivable explanation which fitted in with her knowledge of the man—a knowledge based on that deep intimacy of mind and spirit which had grown out of the wonderful hours they had daily spent together before Candy's return to Waincliff. Blair could only clear himself by involving someone else. And honour forbade this—that honour which had bade him forfeit love and happiness, all that made life worth while, rather than betray another.

Elizabeth felt almost as though a veil had been suddenly torn from her eyes—a veil which had obscured and distorted the whole perspective of things. And now that the veil was rent away, now that she could see clearly, it was too late! Blair had gone away with the full knowledge that she had distrusted him, that she had believed the worst of him, just as others had believed it. Only there was not the same excuse for her as there was for those others. She had loved him—and her love had not been strong enough, had failed when the call came.

No thought of sending for him, of writing and telling him how the passage of time had altered her whole outlook, entered her head. You can't fail a man completely at a crucial moment, condemn him utterly and drive him from you, and then, when saner counsels prevail, send for him back again and explain that you thought you'd made a mistake! Elizabeth recognised that as she had sown, so must she reap, and it was with inherent pluck that she faced the issues of her own failure.

Quietly and determinedly she began "picking up the threads" again, dropping back once more into the familiar usages of life at Brownleaves, and gradually achieving a certain outward serenity which masked the pain at her heart. She talked and laughed again much as usual—it

would not be Elizabeth if her sense of humour deserted her for long—and Jane congratulated herself upon the successful results of taking her away from the painful atmosphere of the Abbey. Candy was kept more or less acquiescent by the fact that Elizabeth either walked or drove over every now and again to pay him a flying visit.

More often than not she made the journey on foot. She had developed a habit of taking long constitutionals, and only she herself knew how often on her return from the Abbey she made a detour which took her past Lone Edge. The sight of the grey towered house, perched on the edge of the cliff, brought her a strange mingling of happiness and pain. It drew her as the sight of a place where one has known great happiness never fails to draw —even though the joy once garnered there has long since turned to dust and ashes. And for Elizabeth, Lone Edge was still vibrant with the memory of that October day when she and Blair had stood together on a jutting shelf of rock and, with only God's sun and sea around them, stepped into their kingdom of heaven.

There was a certain gateway which she always passed on her road back to Brownleaves from the Abbey, and to-day, as she retraced her steps after paying Candy a visit, she paused there as usual and, leaning her arms on the topmost bar, looked over towards the beloved and lonely house on the edge of the cliff, while her thoughts travelled back across the few weeks of intense and utter happiness that had been hers.

A few weeks out of a lifetime! But then, she reflected, some people never got even a few weeks. At least, for all the rest of her life, she would have the remembrance of one golden hour—the supreme hour in which she had learned that as she loved Blair, so he loved her. Nothing

could ever take that from her. And now she had this knowledge, too—her faith had made it knowledge—that he was all and more than she had thought him. It was she, not he, who had failed.

She had not dared to tell her father anything of what she thought and felt. The subject of Blair Maitland was taboo between them, and this fact occasioned an inevitable barrier, so that even on her brief visits to the Abbey a certain atmosphere of restraint and artificiality prevailed betwixt these two who had once been such splendid comrades.

Elizabeth sighed involuntarily. Love had brought her so little—only a memory—and had taken so much. In a way, she had lost the man who had been her best pal and comrade all her life—for she recognised that nothing would ever quite bridge over the gulf that yawned betwixt herself and Candy—and she had lost the man whom she knew now she trusted implicitly and whom she would gladly have followed barefoot the world over.

And then, looking up, she saw him coming towards her, coming across the field at the entrance to which she was standing. He had not seen her, for the gateway where she leaned was at a corner, partly hidden from view by a curve in the tall, thick hedge which bounded the field. Her gaze flew to the approaching figure, fastening on it with the startled, incredulous longing of eyes that have ached and wearied in vain through weeks of absence.

His face had altered. It was still leaner than its wont, lined and haggard as though from sleepless nights, and beneath the dark, straight brows the blue eyes were feverishly bright. Elizabeth felt her heart beat suffocatingly. It was almost like a physical hurt to see him so

altered. Unconsciously she stretched out her hands towards him.

"Blair——" It was hardly more than a thread of sound, a mere gasped-out whisper.

But he heard it, and stopped in his tracks as though shot. Then, his glance leaping towards the place whence that faint utterance of his name had seemed to come, he saw her. In two strides he was at her side, and had taken her in his arms, holding her as though he would never let her go. And for the moment it seemed as though time had slipped back and they were together again on that wild ledge jutting up from the face of Wain Scar, with nothing dividing them, no shadow of doubt or mistrust across their path, no pitiless sword flaming out of the past to set them eternally asunder.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BARRIER

"OH, Blair, and you don't hate me after all?" At last Elizabeth had drawn herself partially out of his arms, and half smiling, half tearful, put her question.

"Hate you?" He laughed triumphantly and caught her back into his embrace again. "It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Well, I think you'd have every right to," she said, after a brief interval during which conversation was out of the question. "I've been a fool. I can't think whatever made me believe all those ridiculous things about you!"

The laughter died suddenly out of his eyes, wiped out by the immediate recollection that nothing was really altered, nothing changed. Though fate had thrown them together again for one brief, glorious moment, actually he and Elizabeth were as much set apart as they had been on that bleak December day when they had said good-bye in the studio.

"Ridiculous!" he repeated. "Unfortunately, they are as true to-day as they were when you first heard them—as they have been all these years," he added bitterly.

"I dare say they are," she replied composedly. "But"—looking up at him with eyes that shone with a secret fire of joy—"how true have they ever been?"

He hesitated.

"What do you mean? I don't quite understand."

"Don't you?" Still the smile lingered in her eyes.

"Then, as your intelligence is so limited, darling, I shall have to explain. I don't believe that you ever stole any pearls at all." She made the assertion with a kind of shy triumph, and her gaze clung to his face, waiting eagerly for a responsive glow of pleasure to irradiate it.

But she waited in vain. Instead, a curious look of dismay overspread his features.

"I don't know what put that idea into your head," he said quietly. "I'm sorry to have to undeceive you. I was imprisoned for that offence and none other."

For an instant she seemed shaken by his decisive answer. Then, recovering herself, she said quickly:

"You mean to tell me, then, that you *did* take them?"

He looked away, avoiding her glance deliberately.

"I wish I could tell you that I didn't," he said heavily. "But I can't."

"I didn't ask you to tell me that you didn't," she returned swiftly. "I asked you to tell me that you *did.*"

He made a sudden violent gesture as of a man in torment.

"Oh, surely we've already thrashed this out enough!" he exclaimed harshly. "Why go through it all again? I've made a mess of my life, and I've got to abide by the consequences."

"Still, I don't believe you were ever a thief," replied Elizabeth. "I did, at first—because you didn't seem able to deny it. I must have been mad, I think. But now I've come to my senses, and your not denying it isn't enough. I shall never believe that you stole anything from anybody unless you tell me that you did. Can you tell me that, Blair?"

Again he sought to evade the clear, questioning grey eyes.

"I can't deny it," he said. "I never have denied it."

"Then will you say: *'I was guilty of theft'?"* she persisted. "Look at me and say that—and on your soul be it if you lie to me, Blair! I couldn't forgive that." The young, impassioned voice ceased. His eyes came slowly back to her face, and for a long moment they stood gazing at each other in silence. Then, in dogged, beaten tones, he answered her.

"No. I can't say that."

"I knew it! Oh, Blair, how could I have been so mad as to believe it for one second! I shall never forgive myself. . . . So you'll have to forgive me instead. Will you? Can you?"

"Can I?" With a sudden inarticulate cry he snatched her up in his arms, and, as they clung together in a transport of love and passionate understanding, the heavy shadow that had lain between them glided away for a space and left them to the wonder and unspeakable ecstasy of reunion.

At last, a little pale and spent with the tide of rapture which had swept her, Elizabeth drew herself slowly and reluctantly out of his embrace.

"And now," she said, "tell me—everything, Blair."

He hesitated.

"I've the right to know," she went on steadily, "the right of the woman who loves you and who is going to be your wife."

She felt his arms relax.

"No," he said tonelessly, "not that. You can never be my wife."

"Blair—!" It was a quick, stifled exclamation of fear.

He continued as though he had not heard it, still in the dogged, toneless voice of a man forced to speak words of which the utterance is sheer, mental agony.

"I see that—I've recognised it ever since your father made it clear—very clear—to me. We can never marry."

"But if you were innocent all the time——"

"My innocence makes no difference whatever. The fact remains that I've been accused, convicted, and imprisoned for theft. Don't you see that *that* is the thing that matters?"

"But you must clear yourself!"—swiftly.

"That's precisely what I can't do. My hands are tied now exactly as much as they have been all these years."

She was trembling violently. With an effort she steadied herself.

"Tell me the whole story. I can't say how right or wrong you are—though I think you're wrong—until I know, can I? Please tell me," she insisted quietly. "It's my right to know the truth, Blair."

"I suppose it is," he admitted. "Well, it's a short enough story. I wasn't the thief, as you've guessed. A woman, whom I imagined myself in love with at the time, had taken the pearls—and even she, poor devil, wasn't quite a deliberate thief. She meant to return them. But, as bad luck would have it, the owner discovered the loss, a hue and cry was raised, and detectives put on to search every soul in the house before she had the opportunity. I tried to get rid of the pearls for her—I'd have pitched them out into the garden, chucked them down anywhere, but I hadn't the remotest chance. The detectives rounded us all up immediately after she'd handed the necklace over

to me, and from that moment until the end they never let one of us out of their sight."

"And it was found—on you?" asked Elizabeth in a hushed voice of horror. She could picture it all so clearly —those terrible moments when, with the pearls in his possession, Blair found himself hemmed about by the sharp eyes of detectives, unable to disembarrass himself of the filched necklace, and knowledge all the time that a few minutes must inevitably bring discovery.

Maitland gave a short laugh.

"No, it wasn't actually found on me. I saved myself the indignity of being searched, when it came to my turn, by handing it over."

"And then? What happened after that?"

"What happened after? Why, the inevitable, of course. I paid the usual penalty of taking what doesn't belong to you. I must allow it looked a pretty obvious case: There was I, with my hostess's pearls in my pocket—and everybody aware of the fact that I was deadly hard up and owing money everywhere."

"Well, but——" Elizabeth looked bewildered. "But what was the woman doing all the while—the woman who had really taken the necklace?"

"Thanking her lucky stars that she had transferred it to me in the nick of time, I should imagine," he answered grimly.

"Do you mean to say she didn't even *try* to clear you?" asked Elizabeth, aghast.

He shook his head.

"No."

"Then why didn't you clear yourself?" she burst out passionately.

"That would have been impossible. A man couldn't

give a woman away like that, still less the woman he cared for. Besides, doesn't it occur to you that, even if I *had* been cad enough to tell the truth, and she had chosen to deny it, it would have looked a pretty thin story? Not a soul in the room would have believed it."

"No, I suppose not," she acknowledged thoughtfully. "But, oh, Blair! How splendid you were! To shoulder the whole thing like that!" Impulsively she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. "I shall be all my life trying to make up to you for what you've gone through!"

He winced a little.

"No," he said. "You can't do that."

"Can't I?"—with a thrill of tenderness in her voice. "You'll see—when I'm your wife."

Very gently he unloosed her arms and put her from him.

"My dearest, I've told you. I can't marry you. Your father was quite right. No man, with that behind him, can decently marry. I see that. After all these years the story, which I'd thought well buried, has cropped up again—in spite of the fact that I did everything possible to cut right away from the past. When I came out of prison I enlisted as Private Smithers—that's why I got a bit of a shock at first seeing Sutherland here. It brought back the past with a rush. Then, when the war was over, I changed my name to Maitland—that was the name of my godfather who had left me his money. Oddly enough"—with a grim twist of his lip—"he died the night before I was sentenced. And, from the time I came out of prison, I've avoided having the slightest communication with a single one of my relatives or former friends. . . . But a new name doesn't give you a new

lease of life—though I once thought it would. The story has cropped out, you see, in spite of every precaution. It might crop out again—after we were married, perhaps."

"I shouldn't care!" returned Elizabeth stoutly.

He smiled down at her rather sadly.

"Yes, you would. Just because you love me. You'd want to flare up and deny it. And you wouldn't be able to—or, at least, you wouldn't get anyone to believe you if you did."

"But now, after all this time, couldn't you tell the whole truth of the story?"

"No. The woman concerned in it is still alive. She's happily married, moreover, and, having shielded her at the time, I must in plain honour abide by the consequences. Though, at the moment, I'll confess I never counted the cost. I acted on impulse—I had to decide very quickly what to do. Still, the fact remains, I did it, and I couldn't take away from her, now, what I gave her then."

Elizabeth was silent. She felt awed by the immensity of the sacrifice this man had made on the altar of loyalty and honour.

"I can't agree. You gave up too much. But even so, it doesn't matter to me whether you've been in prison or not." She looked up at him with a tender, tremulous smile. "I want to marry you, please, Blair."

"My dear——" He bent his head suddenly and kissed her small clasped hands. "You're more wonderful than I thought any woman could be. It's incredible! That you should be willing—I shall have that always to remember. . . . But I can't let you. It's impossible. After all, now that the story has come out—and in future, if it ever follows me again—it will only be *my* hell.

I'm not going to let the woman I love share that hell."

But Elizabeth was fighting for her happiness—hers and his.

"Blair, it isn't fair that you, and I, should pay all our lives for that other woman's sin. You've suffered enough, endured enough for her. You *can't* keep silent forever!"

"I can. And I must. My lips are sealed—now and always."

"But mine are not!" she retorted triumphantly. "If you won't clear yourself, someone else must clear you. And I know that Candy will. If I tell him just what you've told me——"

"You can't do that." His reply came swiftly, cutting across her quick, eager supplication with a sudden terrible finality. "That is the one thing in the world which you cannot do."

"Cannot? Why? Why can't I tell him?"

"Because, don't you see, he'd want to know the woman's name, the whole circumstances, every detail."

"Then tell it him," she besought. "Or let me. He would regard it all as sacred. I know Candy. He's the soul of honour. That's why he refused to let me marry you. Honour counts more with him than anything. Once he knew that you were innocent, he'd find some way out for us—some way in which——"

"There is no way."

"Let me tell him, Blair! At least, I think he'd no longer refuse to let me marry you. If he knew the whole truth, even if the story ever cropped up again about you, he'd merely say—I can hear him!—'I happen to know that he's innocent.' And he'd say it in such a way that people *would believe* him. He's absolutely convincing when he himself is convinced—and everyone who knows

the Frayne pride would be very sure that he'd never let his daughter marry you unless you *were* innocent. And —this sounds horrible, I know, snobby and stuck up, but it isn't really—Candy's family is so well known, so old and respected, that any statement from him carries weight. What he says—goes." She paused, breathless, then added appealingly: "Blair, may I tell him?"

"No, you can't do that. Believe me, it's utterly impossible."

"But, why? Give me some reason!" she exclaimed desperately. "Candy would keep it secret—sacredly so. Don't you believe that?" Her voice rose shrilly.

"I'm sure of it."

"Then, if you're sure of that, what *is* your reason? You must tell me, Blair. I insist. As things are, your silence isn't fair to me. How can I even believe you love me if you refuse me this?" She laid her hands on his shoulders, gazing at him with her whole tortured soul in her eyes, and before the anguished pleading in her face he yielded. Perhaps, after all, it was better she should know the truth than suffer blindly—better that she should realise, once and for all, the nature of that insuperable barrier which must keep them apart, now and forever.

"Then, if you will have it," he said, slowly and unwillingly, "the woman—she was only a mere girl then—was Violet."

"Violet?"

"Yes. *Now* do you see how impossible—how utterly impossible it is to clear me in your father's eyes?"

Elizabeth stared at him strickenly.

"Violet!" she repeated mutteringly, beneath her breath. "Violet!"

She stood motionless, feeling as though she had re-

ceived some stunning blow which had robbed her of all power of movement. Her limbs seemed leaden—heavy and immovable, like the limbs of one dead. But her brain felt frantically, terribly alive, working with the rapidity of a machine, stabbing like a red-hot needle, as her thoughts tore along, envisaging with deadly clarity the hopeless, irretrievable disaster embodied in those four short words: "The woman was Violet."

Violet—on whom depended the whole of Candy's happiness in life! If Violet were shown up, proved to be what she actually was, then for the second time Candy must be thrust down into the depths, be robbed of the faith and belief which he had slowly and painfully built upon the ruins of his early life. And if Violet were still to be shielded—shielded as she had always been by Blair's acceptance of her sin and its due punishment—then Elizabeth's own happiness must be flung into the balance.

For she realised, now, that unless he were cleared of the burden of dishonour which rested upon him, Blair would never marry her. And since that burden could only be lifted by binding it on to the shoulders of the woman who really merited it, she recognised that the whole matter resolved itself into a choice betwixt her own happiness and Candy's. And for Elizabeth, worshipping her father as she had always worshipped him, understanding to the full the bitterness and tragedy which had marred his earlier life, there was no choice.

At all costs, even at the price of her own happiness and Blair's, Candy's faith in Violet must be preserved. Hers could not be the hand to pull down his idol and lay his world again in ruins. Nor could there be any real happiness for her if it must needs be built up on the wreckage of her father's life. . . . There *was* no choice.

From somewhere out of the dim recesses of memory a couple of lines forced themselves into the forefront of her mind:

"YESTERDAY *This* Day's Madness did prepare;
TO-MORROW'S Silence, Triumph, or Despair."

She could not remember at the moment whence they came, only the stark, measureless truth of them drove at her like the thrust of a sword.

She did not know whether it was only minutes—or hours—that passed before she came back to a recognition of Blair's tortured face staring down into hers.

"You see?" he was saying thickly. "You see?"

She nodded.

"Yes," she answered in a queer, stiff voice that seemed to drag itself slowly out of her dry throat. "Yes . . . I see . . . Violet."

She stretched out her hand as though to ward him off.

"Will you go?" she said. "Please go, Blair." Then, rather wildly: "I—I can't bear it if you don't go—quickly."

He looked at her out of eyes which held a bleak agony it is not good that any man's eyes should hold, made a stumbling, uncertain movement towards her, then, without a word, turned and strode blindly away, reeling a little as he went.

CHAPTER XXV

POPPY'S DECISION

BLAIR looked round the denuded studio. During the course of the last three days practically all its contents had been packed up and dispatched to London, and to-morrow he himself, together with the Morrises, was to take his own departure thither. Blinds would be lowered, furniture muffled in ghostly-looking coverings, and once more the grouchy old caretaker would resume sway at Lone Edge—probably bolting and barring all means of entrance there, as had been his unfailing custom until the present owner came into possession.

A fire still burned in the stove which warmed the studio, and as Blair stood in the patch of ruddy light which the open stove door yielded, his face showed worn and haggard in the flickering glow. Three days and nights—three eternities of torment had passed since the afternoon he had strode away, leaving Elizabeth alone to bear her share of the heavy burden which fate had fastened about their necks. He could hardly have told you whether he had slept or eaten or drunk during the time which had elapsed since they had parted. After he had left her he had gone down into the nethermost depths of agony which a man's soul can plumb, and only a certain portion of his brain had continued to work, as usual, detached and insulated. The commonplace, practical part which issued instructions about ordinary, everyday matters that no longer seemed to be of any actual importance

at all. They were only a habit—just the habit of living, and there was really something rather horrible and farcical about it all, if you came to analyse it.

Now that it was over—all this futile ordering and arranging of things that didn't matter—he was aware of a hopeless sense of failure. Everything that counted had been swept away. The new life he had built up on the ruin of the old had crashed to pieces as easily as his former life had crashed eleven years ago. Love had come—uselessly, merely as an added, ceaseless torment. The new friends he had made were cut off from him—cut off by the irrevocable happenings of the past. All he had tried and wished and fought for had crumbled to nothingness.

Slowly he turned to leave the studio, and rather stumblingly made his way back into the house. The panelled room—the room in which he and Jane and Elizabeth had had tea together on the occasion of their first visit to Lone Edge—was still habitable. A fire burned on the hearth, and here the furniture had not yet been swathed in its holland covers. Blair looked round the room with a dull, aching sense of loss. It was over there that Elizabeth had sat. He remembered how gaily she had referred to Lone Edge as a "desirable freehold residence," and how delighted he had been that she thought the house so really beautiful—the house in which he had pictured her enshrined as home-maker. His house and hers! And now—— Oh, well! That dream, along with a lot of other dreams which a man sometimes has, had perished—passed away into the limbo of dead hopes. . . . He was conscious of an intense weariness. On this, the last of the three nightmare days which had dragged by since his final parting from Elizabeth, it had been only by sheer,

dogged force of will that he had contrived to attend to all the business and other detail attendant upon the shutting up of Lone Edge. And now that it was over, every arrangement dove-tailed and complete, an almost unsupportable lethargy came stealing over him. He flung himself down in one of the big-arm chairs which had place on either side of the hearth and in a few minutes he had fallen into the heavy, dreamless slumber of utter fatigue.

He awoke to the consciousness of another presence in the room, to the feeling that he was no longer alone, and, somewhat startled, he opened his eyes and sat up abruptly in his chair. In front of him on the hearthrug, sitting cross-legged about a yard away from his feet, he discovered Poppy Ridgway. Her big eyes, golden in the firelight, were fixed broodingly on his face, and as he opened his own eyes a long-drawn sigh came from between her lips.

"You looked as if you were dead," she said, relief in her voice. "I've been so frightened, sitting here—so frightened." She shivered, as though with cold.

"Dead? Of course I'm not dead, any more than you are," returned Blair bluntly. "But what are you doing here? Who let you into the house?"

"No one. I came in through the studio—someone had left the door open." Maitland vented a sharp exclamation; he remembered, now, leaving open the door which connected the covered way from the studio with the house.

"And what do you want here? You know I'm in London again now—I only came back just to pack up some things."

She nodded. Then slowly she uncrossed her legs and

knelt up by the fire, stretching out her numbed hands to its warm blaze.

"I know—at least, I guessed. That's why I came. I don't mean to stay down here with old granny unless you're here. Aren't you"—her voice quivered—"aren't you going to want me any more?"

He stared past her, out of the window, at the grey, wintry sky.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I think—I'm tired of work. Perhaps I shall go abroad."

Poppy sat back on her heels.

"Tired of work? A famous person like you? My! If I was famous like you are, I'd not get tired of it."

"Fame isn't everything. In fact, it's damned little when you come to count up essential values."

"Huh! I don't know about the kind of 'values' you're speaking of—I don't know what they are exactly—but most folks would give their eye-teeth to be as famous as you. Besides, you've lots of other things. You've got pots of money. And—and you've got Miss Frayne."

"That's just where you're wrong, Poppy. I—haven't got Miss Frayne any longer."

"Wha-at?" She stared at him incredulously. "It's true, then, what they've been saying in the village?"

"As I don't know what they have been saying, I can't enlighten you."

"Why, that—that she's chucked you—Miss Frayne, I mean."

"Put briefly and without any danglements, that about sums up the situation," he answered. "Only—always remember this, Poppy, no matter what you may hear 'in the village'—she was quite right to do it. In fact, she couldn't have done anything else."

"Why couldn't she? I don't see."

"Probably you don't. You're very young yet. When you're older you'll learn—as everyone else does—that the past is always holding you back, making you pay."

"I don't believe that," she returned stoutly.

"Nor did I—once. I used to think you could win through anything, begin building again. But you can't."

"You can! 'Course you can! Look at me—what I was, and what I am now. I'd made a mess of things enough, goodness knows, and then you came along and gave me a hand up."

Blair shook his head.

"You'd only had bad luck. Given a fair chance, you were able to get clear of the mess. . . . But no one can build if the foundation's rotten. And that's what I tried to do—build on a rotten foundation."

"So she's chucked you! . . . What if you did build like you say? D'you think I'd have minded? Not me. Why, I wouldn't have chucked you, not if"—she searched her mind for something that fulfilled her utmost vision of transgression—"not if you'd done something really bad and been put in jail for it, I wouldn't! so there!"

A faint, ironical smile crossed his lips, but he regarded the impetuous, worshipping young face uplifted to his very kindly.

"Wouldn't you?" he said gently. "No, Poppy, I don't believe you would."

"But, of course, you don't want me." The sudden passion which had trembled in her voice dropped into a note of pathos. "You don't, do you?" she went on wistfully, drawing herself nearer to him and laying a frightened, pleading hand on his knee. "If you only wanted me just a very little bit, just sometimes, I'd—I'd try so

hard to make it all up to you. I do love you so. You couldn't do with me as—as a sort of makeshift, could you? . . *Could* you? Though I know I'm not really fit to marry you, of course."

"And it seems I'm not fit to marry anyone else," said Blair bitterly.

With a swift, supple movement she nestled against him, her arms clinging round him, her hair brushing his cheek. He could feel her warm young body palpitating against his side.

"Blair, Blair, let me belong to you—oh, do let me!"

The shaken girlish voice broke against his lips where her mouth lay yielding close beneath them. Half unconsciously his arms went round her. Something within him asked "Why not?"—stridently, like the beating of a hammer. Wasn't this a way out—a way to put the whole world betwixt himself and Elizabeth, a way in which to save her from herself? If she thought he could go straight from her to Poppy Ridgway, it would surely kill her love for him once and for all. And for him, it would bind him down—bind him securely, so that even should he, in one of those wild, weak moments which come to each one of us, regret the strength of will which had bade him refuse to marry her, for her own sake, he would have put it for ever out of his power to undo this one good and decent action.

Moreover, he was terribly miserable and lonely—lonely with that forlorn, "little boy" loneliness which hides itself somewhere in the make-up of every man and reaches out, appealing and dependent, to the mother-instinct in every woman.

"Let me belong to you, Blair," whispered Poppy. She drew his head down on to her shoulder as she knelt

beside him, her arms warm around his neck. "Let me love you—sometimes—just when you wanted me. I'd not bother you—truly I wouldn't."

And with her sweetness and softness and tenderness all about him, at last he yielded.

"Would it make you very happy, Poppy?" he asked.

"Happy?" Her voice throbbed. "It 'ud be heaven."

"It seems to me you've rather a poor idea of heaven, but if that's yours—well, I don't see why you shouldn't have it. Only don't blame me if later on you find out I'm a cross-grained old curmudgeon and bad to live with."

She clung to him with an abandon that was pathetic in its desperate surrender.

"You can beat me if you like," she said huskily, "so long as you'll love me sometimes."

A measure of the passion pulsing up in her communicated itself to him. He held her more closely and his lips moved compassionately against her hair. They were flotsam and jetsam of life, he and she—let them glean what they might of comfort from each other. . . .

Suddenly there came the sound of steps in the hall outside, the door was thrown open, and Morris's imperturbable voice announced:

"Mrs. Frayne."

At the first footfall Blair and Poppy had sprung apart, and when Violet entered the room all that she saw was Maitland and the girl whom she knew to be his model standing together in front of the fire. She took no notice of the girl, ignoring her completely—members of the lower classes made no appeal to her—and Poppy, sensing her attitude, regarded her with hostile, suspicious eyes. What did this beautifully gowned and rather beatiful personage want here, she wondered resentfully. She was

the lady from the Abbey, where Miss Frayne lived—Blair's Miss Frayne. Had she come to straighten things out somehow—to tell him that Miss Frayne wanted him back? Poppy's suspicions deepened into terrified apprehension. She wouldn't give him up—she'd fight for him, rather!—she wasn't going to let this woman interfere, no matter how grand a lady she might be!

Violet glanced towards her as though expecting her to go, but the girl stood her ground defiantly. She didn't intend to leave this Mrs. Frayne alone with Blair if she could help it. She hated the look of her.

Then Maitland addressed her just in the usual every-day tones with which he had been wont to dismiss her at the end of a sitting in his studio.

"You'd better cut along, Poppy. I'll see you again to-morrow morning."

She threw him a despairing, pleading glance, and made no movement to obey.

"Do you hear?" he said sharply. She yielded then, unwillingly, to the authoritative note in his voice and to the long habit of obedience, and crossed the room to the door slowly and sullenly, shooting a last vindictive glance at Violet as she went.

Once outside the door she paused, looking round her irresolutely. The hall was empty. From within the room came the sound of Violet's voice, raised and a little shrill. With a sudden impulsive movement, lithe and noiseless as the movement of a wild creature, Poppy dropped on one knee beside the closed door and pressed her ear to the keyhole. She must know—she *must!*—why this woman had come to see Blair.

She could not hear everything—sometimes the voices fell too low for her to catch the sense of what they were

saying. But she heard enough—enough for her sharp, guttersnipe brain to piece together all the facts.

Violet, terrified by Maitland's return to Waincliff, not understanding it, had come to swear him once again to secrecy. Something in Elizabeth's face the day before, when she had talked with her for a short time on one of her visits to the Abbey, had alarmed her. She looked *different,* somehow. Violet couldn't quite explain to herself in what the difference lay, but it was there. And once, when Elizabeth's eyes had rested on her for a moment, very steadily and reflectively, she had felt as though there were something significant in the look. To her frightened imagination it seemed to convey a sense of quiet knowledge—of knowledge of the part she herself had played in Maitland's life.

"You promise you'll never say it was I who took the pearls, Blair?" she implored him, her voice pinched and shrill with anxiety.

"I've promised you that so often," he answered coldly. "Is there any need to ask me again?"

"Well, I didn't know. You want to marry Elizabeth, and as it's only your having been in prison that stands in the way, of course you'd like to clear yourself."

"I certainly should."

"But you can't, Blair, you can't!" she rejoined excitedly. "You've sworn you won't! You've promised me, and I won't release you from that promise——"

"I shall never ask you to release me."

"Then why have you come back? What are you going to do?"

"I came back to close up the house. I'm going away for good, if that's what you want to know."

"Ah——!" It was a gasp of relief.

Poppy, guessing that the interview would not last much longer, scrambled silently to her feet and flitted across the hall and down the stairs. Once outside the front door she took her way home, passing through the little grocery shop like a young whirlwind.

"Here, where've you been traipsing to all afternoon?" called her grandmother querulously. "Leavin' me to mind the shop by misself! You've a-got to 'elp with it now you're earnin' naught from Mr. Maitland. *I* can't afford to keep a fine lady doin' nothing about the place. D'you 'ear what I say?"

Poppy paused, her hand on the knob of the door which led into the cottage premises behind the shop.

"I hear," she said defiantly. "But you'll not have me to keep for long. I'm going to be married." And with that she slipped away, leaving old Granny Ridgway muttering angrily and incredulously to herself.

Meanwhile Poppy fled upstairs to her tiny bedroom under the roof and, flinging herself down on the bed, gave herself up to her thoughts. She could put two and two together as well as anyone, and the reason why Blair's engagement had been broken off was perfectly clear to her. Something, some honest and generous impulse, bade her go straight to Miss Frayne and tell her the whole truth, but something that was stronger still, the stormy passion of her love for Blair, restrained her.

"I can't give him up," she muttered, staring wide-eyed at the sloping, whitewashed ceiling. "I can't give him up."

She had only to keep her knowledge secret and Blair was hers. He had promised to marry her, and she knew him well enough to be sure that, having once given his

word, he would keep it, no matter at what cost to himself. So she would remain silent.

"But I'll make him happy." She tried to justify her silence to herself. "I'll make him so happy that he'll forget all about Miss Frayne."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BARRIER DOUBLED

IF you look back in an endeavour to pin down what it was that actually started you on a particular line of conduct you frequently discover that it was not a single big impulse alone which was responsible, but a whole series of lesser entangling pushes and mental urgings which have rushed out in the wake of that primary impulse, light as the threads of a spider's web—a filament here, a filament there—until finally you are caught up and driven irresistibly into a certain definite course of action.

It had been thus with Blair. A tangle of motives had hurried him into his impetuous promise to marry Poppy Ridgway, and although in the case of Elizabeth's determination to hold her peace concerning Violet's guilt the moving impulses were less complex, her decision yet sprang from a twofold incentive. Primarily her thought had been to preserve her father's happiness, but alongside that spontaneous wish, steadying and strengthening her resolve when the bitterness of the price to be paid might otherwise have broken it down, lay a curiously deep-rooted sense of justice. It was through her mother—through Irene—that Candy had originally suffered, and now that it rested with her daughter either to wreck or save his present happiness, it seemed to Elizabeth that honour demanded she should safeguard it. In a way, she felt as though she were paying her mother's debt—making reparation.

It was this thought to which she clung desperately when the path she had chosen seemed at times almost too hard, too difficult to tread. And after her return to the Abbey it very often seemed like that. She had returned there from Brownleaves a few days after her final interview with Blair. Candy had been fretting bitterly at her absence, and now that she and the man she loved had said farewell to each other, knowing to the full the irrevocableness of that farewell and the purpose of it, there seemed no particular reason why she should remain away from home any longer.

With complete knowledge of the circumstances, any soreness she had originally felt against her father for the attitude he had adopted had died away. What he thought, what anyone *thought,* seemed too trivial to worry about in the face of the hard, granite facts which stood for ever betwixt her and any happiness in life. And you can dree your weird as well in one place as another.

It is true that at times the temptation to clear Blair was almost irresistible, particularly when something in Violet's manner—her little dainty air of queening it over her husband and everyone else at the Abbey, her spoilt-child way of indulging herself in any and every whim that took her—jarred badly on Elizabeth's knowledge of the real woman. She often found it very difficult—almost beyond her power—to behave naturally to her stepmother, and yet she knew she must contrive to do this, or else Candy's suspicions would be aroused. And this necessity for daily, hourly pretence had become an ever-increasing strain.

Violet's original offence, the stealing of the pearl necklace, seemed to Elizabeth to pale into insignificance

beside the profound and cruel selfishness which could accept sanctuary at the price of the complete spoliation of a man's life. There were moments when she felt that she hated Violet—hated her for her beauty and charm, hated her because she had won Candy's love and was holding it by a fraud. And at such moments it was only the remembrance of her father's earlier tragic years and present happiness that kept her silent. "I never thought, miss, fifteen years ago, that I should live to see the master look as proud and happy a man as he does to-day." Mrs. Dove's words were like a talisman, reminding her that it was Candy whom she was protecting by her silence. She was not deliberately sheltering Violet herself—the latter was really only being shielded because, worthless though she appeared in every other way, she happened to be instrumental in securing Candy's happiness.

So the days and weeks wore on, and gradually—since habit is a strange taskmaster and holds certain alleviations in his gift—she grew more or less accustomed to the burden she was bearing, a burden she must bear alone, not daring to make a confidant of anyone, even of Jane Wentworth. Jane's own love for her—for Irene's child—combined with her uncompromising sense of justice would probably—almost certainly—have ended in her blurting out the truth, whether or not Candy's happiness went down in the full disclosure of the facts.

When spring came, those first quickening days of April, tipping the trees with the pale green of unfolding bud, scenting the air with daffodil and violet, murmurous with the call of mating birds, Elizabeth found her load still heavier to bear. The irony of it all, of this new, thrusting life with its promise of summer and fruition, seemed to mock her, reminding her sharply that the future

held no flowering for her, that the years streached ahead, as long as she should live, empty and meaningless and barren. Still, at least, she reflected sometimes, with a kind of bitter optimism, life had done its worst, hurt her as much as it was possible to be hurt. She need fear no further, harder pain to bear. And then, without any warning, the blow fell, and she learned that neither man nor woman can set a limit to fate's testing, nor to their own powers of endurance.

It was on a night when Sutherland and the Wentworths were dining at the Abbey to meet a certain Richard Travers, an artist with whom Candy had struck up one of his characteristically enthusiastic friendships whilst in Italy. Travers had been back in England some months, working at the picture he had designed for the forthcoming Academy exhibition, and he came down to Waincliff full of the latest news and gossip from London town.

After dinner the conversation chanced to turn upon the subject of artists and their models, and it was then that Travers, quite unwittingly, dropped a bombshell into the midst of the party.

"Oh, you can never prophesy what may happen if a model is particularly attractive," he averred conversationally. "Look what Maitland's done—Blair Maitland, the sculptor, you know. There's an instance of the unexpected, if you like." He spoke as though assuming that the particular circumstance to which he referred was a matter of general knowledge.

A swift, anticipatory sense of shock ran through the little company like a current of electricity. For an instant dead silence followed the artist's remark. Then, in a rather thin, high-pitched tone of voice, Violet asked:

"What has he done?"

"Why, it was fairly early in the New Year that it happened," replied Travers, in some surprise. "London buzzed with it at the time. Do you mean to say you haven't heard? I thought you'd be sure to know, as Maitland has a house somewhere down in this direction, hasn't he?"

"News travels slowly to the back of beyond," said Candy quietly. "We've heard nothing of Mr. Maitland since he closed his house down here and went back to London."

Travers nodded.

"That's when it happened," he said. "He came back to London and straightaway married his model."

To Elizabeth it seemed as if for a moment her heart stopped beating. Blair—*married!* A paralysing silence wrapped her round, the silence of utter and illimitable catastrophe. Then, with a jerk, her heart started thudding unsteadily in her side, her faculties returned, and she became conscious of Travers' voice prattling amiably on:

". . . a girl called Poppy Ridgway, half Italian, who's been his own special model for some time. Beautiful creature, but quite common and uneducated. Maitland must have been mad to marry her."

Elizabeth never quite remembered how the remainder of the evening passed. She recollected a sudden hubbub of talk when Travers had finished detailing the facts of Maitland's marriage—everybody rushing in in an endeavour to direct the conversation into some other channel. Then, later, at Candy's suggestion, Violet had sung to them—sung in that appealing voice of hers, thrillingly sweet and clear and true as a child's. As someone had

once said: "When Violet Frayne sings you think of saints and angels sitting on clouds, and of your hopes of heaven—and you come to the conclusion that you're too inky-black bad ever to go there—and that Frayne is the luckiest man on earth."

Richard Travers received a similar impression, and he hung round Violet for the rest of the evening, persuading her to sing again and again, while Elizabeth sat quietly in a corner, outwardly self-possessed, inwardly feeling stone cold—frozen, and reflecting with a curious detached sense of irony that that was the voice which had had the actual ordering of Blair's life—which had driven him out into the desert of utter loneliness, and at last into the arms of Poppy Ridgway.

Well, Violet was safe enough now! There would no longer be that unbearable temptation to reveal her secret. Never any more. If the truth were told tomorrow it could make no difference to anyone, now—bring no happiness. Blair himself had closed the door upon that for ever.

Elizabeth's hands gripped the arms of her chair convulsively. She wanted something to hold on to, even if it were only a material lump of wood, in the midst of the chaos which seemed to have descended upon her. Her whole world was reeling. Blair was married . . . married. . . .

"Come outside for a little while, Elizabeth. It's quite warm enough for a stroll in the garden if you'll put on a wrap."

Colin's voice, kind, infinitely kind and tender, broke quietly across the confused turmoil of her thoughts. There was something strangely reassuring about it. It

seemed to bring her back once more to the normal everyday realities of life—like a friendly human hand stretched out to someone stumbling blindly and alone in terrifying darkness. She looked up, forcing a smile to her stiff lips.

"Yes, I'll come," she answered simply. "Wait while I fetch a coat."

He nodded.

"I'll wait for you by the garden door," he said.

She joined him there in a few moments, and together they passed out into the moonlit garden. Colin slipped his arm within hers and for some time they paced up and down in silence. Presently he spoke, a little hesitatingly, picking his words, yet with a certain quiet determination behind his hesitance.

"This has altered everything," he began.

She nodded palely.

"Yes," she said. "It's altered everything."

"Elizabeth"—the arm within hers tightened its pressure a bit—"I needn't say to you I'm sorry—I think you know, without any telling of mine, that anything which hurts you, hurts me. I wish—I wish to God"—his voice roughened suddenly—"that you hadn't this to bear—that I could bear it for you!"

She gave his arm a little grateful squeeze.

"I know, Colin. It's—it's dear of you to feel like that. Only, you see, no one can bear one's troubles but oneself."

"That's so. But sometimes one can help. I never meant to speak of this again, because always it seemed to me that some day, somehow, things might right themselves between you and Maitland. And I wanted your happiness more than anything else. But now I know

that they can't, I'm going to ask you once more to marry me. . . . No"—as he sensed the negation that sprang involuntarily to her lips—"don't answer me yet. Hear what I have to say first. Life is a long road—terribly long—to travel alone. And I can't bear to think of you without someone to take care of you and look after you, to stand betwixt you and the difficulties that come in everybody's life. I'm not asking for your love, dear. That's given—and no one knows better than I that love once given is given for always. Once, long ago, you promised that we should be pals, always. I'm asking now if you'll let me be your *best* pal—that's all."

Elizabeth was silent a moment, touched to the core of her by the loyalty which brought this man back to her side, only asking to be of service, when life had left her desolate and bereft.

"Colin"—her voice broke in spite of herself. "If I believed it would make *you* happy, I think I should say yes. I'm not a happy person myself, but I might be happier if I felt I was making someone else happy—even a little. But I don't think it would—do that for you. You imagine, now, that friendship would be enough. The time would come when you'd feel differently, and then you'd resent it because I could give you nothing more."

He smiled faintly.

"No," he said. "No, you're wrong. I'm not asking this on impulse. I'm asking, knowing just precisely what I'm asking for. You see, dear, when a man loves a woman as I love you, it's something—something very wonderful—just to feel that she belongs to him, that it's his right, before any other man's, to shield and care for her. Elizabeth, we're two very lonely people. Don't

you think you could give me that right—the right to try and make your loneliness a little less?"

Sore and hurt as she was, her heart raw from the sting and smart of Blair's unbelievable marriage, Colin's tenderness, the quiet depth of his unselfish love for her, held a strange warmth of comfort and appeal. Here was someone as lonely as herself to whose loneliness she could minister. In bringing a modicum of happiness into Colin's thwarted life she might learn at last to forget a little the barrenness of her own. He had not asked much —no more than she could give. And if such a gift were worth his taking, why should she withhold it?

"Once," she said slowly, "I thought that neither Blair nor I should ever marry, that we could always still be faithful to each other—that such faithfulness would be a bond between us, holding us all our lives. But—well, evidently it didn't mean to Blair what it meant to me. He's broken the bond, and I'm free. It wouldn't be disloyal of me to marry—because"—she smiled rather desolately—"I've no one to be loyal to. . . . I've very little to give, Colin, only friendship. But if you still want me——"

"If I want you?" For a moment his voice was shaken with sudden passion. Then—for he loved her very deeply, so deeply that he could curb himself and his desires for her sake—he drew her into his arms, and very gently, with little passion but unspeakable tenderness, he stooped and kissed her.

CHAPTER XXVII

FAIR PLAY

IT was a sultry evening in July. The air was stirless, heavy with that still, ominous lassitude which presages a coming storm, and now and again the tender twilight of the summer night was illumined by a distant flicker of sheet lightning. Indoors, the closeness of the atmosphere was oppressive, and, as soon as she had finished dinner, Elizabeth strolled out on to the terrace.

She had been dining in solitary state, as Candy and Violet had run up to London to attend the wedding of a friend, and were not expected back again until the following evening. In a way, their departure afforded her a certain feeling of relief. Throughout the last few months she had been living at rather a high state of tension, and now the absence of her father and stepmother enabled her to relax the species of "on guard" attitude which had become more or less habitual, to be just herself and think her own thoughts without the necessity of playing up to Candy or of concealing her comtempt for the woman who was his wife.

And she had many things to think about—above all, of the new life which was now approaching very near to her, the new life wherein her marriage to Wentworth would stand like a dividing wall betwixt the past and future. The wedding was fixed for the end of July, and it had been arranged that, afterwards, she and Colin should travel for several months before settling down

at Brownleaves. Elizabeth was looking forward to leaving England with a queer, feverish eagerness. She felt that to go away for a time—right away from Waincliff and all the sad and bitter memories which it held—would help her to readjust her outlook, enable her to take a fresh grip on life and begin again. Here, every corner, every road almost, served to recall some poignant moment out of the past. Even the rhythmic wash of the sea at the foot of the cliffs murmured its own bitter reminder of the day when Blair had first told her that he loved her, as they stood together on Wain Scar. And love was scored out of her life for ever. In the future there remained only the deep affection which she had for Colin—and affection is such worlds away from love!—and the knowledge that she had saved Candy's happiness and, in so doing, paid her mother's debt.

The happiness of two other people had also sprung from that same soil—that soil which Elizabeth had sown with sacrifice and watered with secret tears. For Jack Sutherland had at last persuaded Jane to marry him, and these two were reaping a late harvest of tranquil peace and contentment. When Colin's engagement to Elizabeth had become an actual fact, the doctor had returned to the charge once more.

"I promised you once," he told Jane, "that I should go on asking you to marry me until some day you said 'yes' out of sheer boredom. And now the one effectual excuse with which you always warded me off is gone. You can't say Colin 'is your job' any longer! He's Elizabeth's job, and he won't need you any more. Jane, dear"—the deep voice shook a little with the long hunger of years of faithful love and waiting—"Jane, dear, couldn't you make me—*your* job now?"

And at last she had capitulated. It was quite true that, once married, Colin would no longer need her, and it was very apparent that Doctor Jack—lonely, grown-up child that he was, with his big kind heart aching to spend its love on someone—needed her very badly. So Jane, as she had done all her life, went where she was needed. The wedding had been a very quiet affair, and now, until his own marriage took place, Colin was being very competently looked after by Sarah, assisted by frequent visits from Jane herself.

"And I'll look well after 'em both, miss—I mean ma'am—when they're man and wife," Sarah informed her valiantly. "For 'tis true they'm no more than children, neither of them."

All these thoughts and memories passed in long procession through Elizabeth's mind as she leaned on the old carved balustrade which skirted the terrace and gazed across the valley to the undulating hills beyond. Here and there green, grassy rides intersected the woods. Dim and mysterious, they seemed to her to lead one knew not whither, like the paths of life. Where would this new path upon which she was so soon adventuring lead her? She felt as though she were standing at the head of one of those long grassy rides, unable to discern its end or turning, wondering where it led. Her heart beat a shade more quickly; a little sense of fear invaded her. She tried to shake it off, telling herself that she was merely strung-up to-night on account of the thunder in the air. And then, without any warning, came the sound of footsteps crossing the flags behind her—steps that smote against her ear with a sudden heart-shaking sense of familiarity. She swung round and stared incredulously at the figure approaching through the dusk. Her

hand flew to her throat where her heart seemed to be beating suffocatingly.

"Blair——"

"Yes, it is I. They told me I should find you here."

She peered at him through the dim light, and the changes which six months had worked in him shocked her. His usually lean face was thin to gauntness and heavily lined, while his eyes, deeply sunken and haggard, burned with a curious brilliance. A stifled cry of pity sprang to her lips and involuntarily she stretched out her hand towards him. He caught it in his, holding it in a grip that almost crushed the slender fingers. She tried to withdraw it, but she might as well have striven to release it from a vice. And again a quick sense of apprehension smote her.

"I—I thought you were in London," she faltered uncertainly. "Where have you come from?"

"From Lone Edge. I had to come back there. I couldn't keep away. Elizabeth——" He drew her towards him, unconsciously relaxing the tensity of his grip, and with a sudden wrench she dragged herself free and stepped back from him.

"And why are you here? Oh, you shouldn't have come here!" she cried.

"Should I not? Where else should I go? Didn't you know—didn't you *know* that some day I should come back to you—come as surely as daylight follows dark? Did you think I could keep away eternally? . . . If so, you were mightily mistaken."

There was a desperate harshness and bitterness in his voice that frightened her.

"You shouldn't have come," she repeated. "Now—now that you're married——"

"Married!" he broke in mockingly. "God, yes! I'm married. I've added marriage as a make-weight to the general hash I've made of life."

"Why—why did you do it, Blair?" she asked tremulously. "You forgot—so soon."

"Forgot?" If she had ever needed any denial it was there in the concentrated anguish of that one short word. "Forgot? Did you think I had forgotten?" He paused, then went on slowly: "After we parted I went mad, I think, for a time, and I married intending to set us as far apart as possible, to save you from yourself—and from me. In my madness I built up a barrier between us—an impassable barrier I thought it was. And I've tried to hold to it—all these months. But now"—his voice deepened with gathering passion—"but now I know that I can't do it. And I'm here to tear it down. Henceforth there'll be no barrier between us two. I've come to take you away with me . . . to-night."

He stooped towards her, but with a cry she swerved aside from him.

"Blair, are you mad?"

He shook his head.

"No, I'm not mad now. I was mad when I thought I could do without you—go through life without you. But I've come to my senses now—oh, Elizabeth, beloved—*beloved!*" Before she could prevent him he had caught her in his arms and was holding her against his breast, kissing her with a stormy passion that nearly swept away her self-command. "We'll go abroad, sweetest, and find our happiness together—tell me you love me enough to come away with me! Tell me!"

Almost she surrendered to that tide of passion. The touch of his lips on hers, the feel of the beloved arms

about her, filled her with pure rapture after the long months of torturing absence. Then the remembrance of Poppy, and of Colin, rose between her and the man she loved like a dividing sword.

"Oh, hush! hush!" She strained away from him. "I can't go—don't ask me! You *know* I love you. But I can't go away with you—just *because* I love you."

"You'll come, if you love me," he said swiftly, jealously. "Oh, heart's beloved, think again—think of what it would mean, always to be together, you and I. I'd spend my whole life in making up to you for all you forfeited in coming with me."

"You couldn't," she said quickly. "You couldn't. I don't mean the mere material things—I'm not afraid of what people would say—or think. Nothing of that would matter to me. I'd count all of it an easy price to pay—to be with you. . . . But we've not only just ourselves to consider. There's Poppy—and Colin."

"Colin?" His arms slackened their hold of her and he fell back a pace. "It's true, then?"

"Yes," she answered steadily. "I've promised to marry him."

"To marry Colin? . . . God!" He spoke under his breath.

"So you see," she went on bravely, "we can't go away together, Blair. We can't—without hurting other people. If—if it were only ourselves that mattered, it would be different. But—we must play the game." She looked up at him piteously, white-faced, but with eyes whose steadfastness shone unshaken like some still, white flame burning up to heaven. "Dear, there could be no happiness for us if we took it like that. You must go back to your wife—to Poppy. . . . Oh, Blair, do help

me! It's so hard to say 'no.' Do help me to play fair."

Tremulously her hands went out to him and he took them and held them in a strong, firm grip. The passion had died out of his face. It was drawn and unspeakably sad, but she knew that she had won the battle, the winning of which had been such agony. For she had fought not only him, but herself, and the love in her heart which ached to give him all he asked.

"You'll go back, Blair?" she urged. "Back to Poppy?"

He bent his head.

"Yes," he said unsteadily, "I'll go."

And then, with no other word, no further touch of lips on lips, he turned and left her alone in the dusk, and she heard the sound of his footsteps grow less and less until they died away into silence.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CONFESSION

THE months which had elapsed since her marriage had taught Poppy many things—above all, they had taught her that a one-sided love can bring nothing but pain and regret in its train. She knew now, those months had shown it her with a clarity there was no mistaking, that she had quite failed to make Blair happy—failed even to give him the comfort which she had so longed to do. For love bereft cannot be comforted, and the substitution of another love for the one that has been taken away, far from being a consolation, frequently but adds a keener edge to the torment of each day—that keenest edge of all which lies in the stinging bitterness of remembrance and comparison.

Poppy had given her whole self, body and soul, to make Blair happy, and her reward had been to hear him muttering about Elizabeth when, at night, she had lain awake at his side, staring tearlessly into the dark. Elizabeth—always Elizabeth! Never once had her own name passed his unconscious lips.

He was invariably gentleness and kindness itself to her, but gentleness and kindness are a poor substitute for love, and Poppy's passionate young heart was like to break against that deadening kindness of affection. But she never let Blair know it. Though she sobbed her heart out many a day, he never saw her tears—nor guessed them. She was always ready to greet him with

a smile when he returned after no matter how long or short an absence, always ready to pose for him by the hour as of old, always pliant and docile and adoring with the pathetic, uncomplaining adoration of a devoted dog.

Then one day in July he had suggested that they should go back to Lone Edge—London was stiflingly hot, he could work better down there, a breath of the sea would do them both good. And so on. Poppy pretended to accept his reasons, tried even to make herself believe she really did accept them, but deep within herself she knew infallibly, without a shadow of doubt, what lay behind her husband's sudden impulse to go back to Waincliff—that it was the longing to see again the place where Elizabeth lived, perhaps even to snatch a distant glimpse of Elizabeth herself. Nevertheless she hid her knowledge, and yielded as she would have yielded to anything in the world that he desired, no matter what it cost her.

She knew now the whole truth concerning the theft of the pearl necklace, knew, too, why Elizabeth kept silence as to who was really the guilty person. Conscience, and the inability to keep anything from Blair, had driven her into confessing how she had overheard the conversation betwixt himself and Violet, and it was then that he had enlightened her as to the whole story, pledging her to secrecy. It was a point of honour beyond Poppy's comprehension, but if Blair declared it to be a point of honour, then of course it must be. She accepted his standard of values with blind, unquestioning loyalty.

Full knowledge of the actual circumstances had in a large measure relieved her inner anxiety, so that, although she went unwillingly to Waincliff, she derived a certain sense of security from the fact that, regarded from Blair's and Elizabeth's standpoint, there existed a

definite something which must always keep them apart. And within twenty-four hours of the Maitlands' arrival at Lone Edge, the news of Elizabeth's engagement and approaching marriage had filtered through to them by way of the Morrises, and Poppy felt that yet another link was added to the chain on which her safety hung. Blair had said very little when the news reached them. But after dinner he had shut himself up alone in the panelled room, leaving Poppy to her own devices, and later she had heard him go out. The sound of his footsteps—eager, purposeful footsteps—striding down the drive had filled her with a sudden, inexplicable sense of foreboding. It was not Blair's custom to go out in an evening, leaving her alone. A frightened feeling of intense solitariness came over her, and she had wandered out on to the narrow, low-walled terrace which overhung Sandy Cove and sat on the wall, gazing down at the waves as they surged in and out of the tiny bay. They fascinated her, with their resistless encroachment on the yellow sands—a dusky sable now in the half-light of the evening—and the continuous hollow boom of the billows breaking at the base of the cliffs sounded in her ears like a funeral dirge.

How long she sat there she could not have told, waiting for Blair to come back—waiting with a curious unaccountable anxiety which increased as hour after hour went by. Sheet lightning played occasionally across the sea, throwing up in vivid outline the sheer cliffs which sentinelled the shore, but, absorbed in her thoughts, Poppy paid no heed to it. Then, suddenly, without warning, a jagged flash slanted across the sky, splitting it asunder, followed by a crackling roar of thunder that echoed and re-echoed along the rocky coast. With a

stifled cry she turned and fled back into the house.

In the hall she encountered Morris, his face as expressionless and imperturbable as usual.

"It's eleven o'clock, madam. Shall I wait up for the master?"

She glanced hurriedly at her watch.

"No, don't wait, Morris," she said. "I'll sit up for him myself."

The man, glad enough to be released from duty, bowed and went away, leaving her alone, and then began a long and dreadful period of waiting. The storm, which had been so long a-gathering, had broken at last with terrifying fury. Outside, the lightning was almost continuous, breath-taking stabs and zig-zags of blinding light tearing the night sky to ribbons, while the thunder crashed and rolled overhead until to Poppy, crouched and shivering in her chair, it appeared as though the very house itself rocked with the terrible reverberation. At last, just when it seemed as if the whole heavens and earth must hurtle into chaos amid the wild uproar of the storm, the rain came, and gradually, with its falling, the lightning waned and the thunder slowly sank into a distant muttering.

Twelve—one o'clock—half-past! Still the rain was coming down in a pitiless, sheeting downpour, and still Blair had not returned. Poppy was racked with anxiety. She pictured him smitten by lightning, prostrate somewhere in a lonely field or copse, killed or fatally injured, or else, having missed his footing in the driving hurly-burly of the storm and pitched headlong over the edge of one of the cliffs, as lying in a mangled heap on the rocks below. Her imagination ran riot, conjuring up all the dread possibilities of his prolonged absence.

But at last she heard steps coming up the drive—not those striding, purposeful ones that had traversed it earlier in the evening, but slow, halting footsteps, the heavy, beaten tread of a man whose nerve and muscle holds no longer any buoyancy on which he can still call. She ran, on feet grown swift with terror, to the front door and opened it. A little bleak wind which had risen drove a scurry of rain into her face. Then Blair, wet to the skin, his clothes torn and muddied, his shoulders bent with fatigue, stumbled across the threshold and into the house. Hardly seeming to be aware of her presence he lurched past her and into one of the rooms, where he dropped heavily into a chair.

She followed him, walking slowly now, as one who shrinks from what the next few moments may reveal.

"Blair," she said, in a thin, reedy voice of terror. "Blair, what's happened to you? Where've you been?"

He regarded her with sombre eyes.

"I've been walking," he replied dully. "I've walked —miles, I suppose."

As a matter of fact he had been tramping ever since he had left Elizabeth alone on the Abbey terrace—mile after mile, through woods and hedges, thrusting his way betwixt branches that whipped and stung him as he passed, out on to the wide darkness of the downs, careless of direction, his thoughts concentrated beyond any consciousness of outward things on the immeasurable ruin and havoc of his life.

"You're wet through," remarked Poppy inconsequently, laying her hand on his sleeve. Then more vehemently: "Tell me where you've been?"

Maitland dragged himself up out of his chair. That

which he had to say must be said standing, as a man instinctively stands up to a crisis.

"I've been to the Abbey—to ask Elizabeth to go away with me," he said, speaking very clearly and deliberately. "And she has refused."

A faint cry, stifled almost before its birth, broke from Poppy's lips. That was all. For the rest, she stood staring dumbly at the man she loved with wide, stricken eyes, the blood draining slowly from her cheeks until they were ashen-pale, while a curious pinched look grew about her nostrils, robbing the beautiful childish face of its youth.

Blair leaned against the chimneypiece. His hand, gripping its edge, was strained till the knuckles showed bone-white underneath the skin.

"Try to forgive me, Poppy—to understand," he said. "I've behaved like a cur to you. I know all that. But, at least, this is the end. I've come to my senses—learned my lesson at last."

Still she said nothing—only gazed at him with piteous, bewildered eyes. At length:

"Why wouldn't she go with you?" she asked curiously. "She—she *must* love you," she added simply, as though loving Blair were a matter that understood itself.

"Yes, she loves me," he assented.

"Then—then why?"

"Why?" He spoke with sudden violence. "Because she's one of God's saints whom even I couldn't drag down to my rotten level . . . because she won't take what belongs to another woman . . . because she'd run straight—play fair—even if it killed her to do it. That's why."

She shivered a little. The harsh agony in his voice

seemed to smite every nerve in her body. How he loved this other woman . . . Elizabeth!

"I'm tired," she said irrelevantly. "Come upstairs and take off your wet things. You'll catch cold."

He slept like a dead man that night, the still, deep sleep of absolute mental and physical exhaustion. But Poppy watched through the long hours, her thoughts running wild until at last an idea took shape in her mind —an idea that was pathetically, characteristically one of Poppy's own, undisciplined, hopelessly wrong-headed, and yet completely selfless—as selfless as the instinct of a wild animal to sacrifice itself for its young.

CHAPTER XXIX

OTHER PEOPLE'S HAPPINESS

WENTWORTH was pacing slowly up and down the flagged path at Brownleaves. It was a glorious afternoon. Last night's thunderstorm had cleared the atmosphere, and the steady downpour of rain had freshened the thirsty growing things in the garden so that once more the tall hollyhocks and delphiniums lifted their heads proudly to the blue skies, while roses and mignonette poured out their garnered fragrance on the air. Even the quaintly-cut box hedges looked furbished up, the dust of the preceding days washed from their shiny green leaves so that they gleamed in the sunlight as though some invisible housemaid had newly polished them.

Colin sniffed the crystalline air, pungent with the tang of brine from the sea, with satisfaction. Oh, it was a good world! A good world on a summer's afternoon, when, in a very few days, you were to be married to the most wonderful woman in that world. He had not yet ceased to marvel at the amazing good fortune which had befallen him—befallen a lame dog who had "never expected to be taken any notice of again by sweet and charming people." And now the most sweet and charming of them all was going to belong to him. He would spend his whole life in furthering her happiness, in seeing that she never regretted the precious gift that she

was bestowing on him of herself, never repented the glorious trust she had reposed in him.

He was thinking now of all that he would do to make her happy, to help her to forget the tragic past, and so absorbed was he in his thoughts that he positively jumped when Sarah's brisk voice sounded in his ears.

"A lady to see you, sir—Mrs. Maitland."

He looked past the comfortable, middle-aged figure of the old servant to the slender, girlish one of the woman who stood, irresolutely, a few paces behind her. There was no sign of welcome on his face. He had never cared for or approved of Poppy Ridgway, and he disliked her still more now that she had become Mrs. Maitland, even though it was to this very fact that he owed his own prospect of future happiness.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked, somewhat stiffly, as Sarah, having fulfilled her part, retreated to the house, leaving him alone with Blair's wife.

"Yes." Poppy spoke a trifle breathlessly. "I—I wanted to ask you something."

There was a shy hesitance in her manner that was rather disarming. She reminded Colin of a child who has come to ask a favour of a grown-up person and is doubtful as to the way in which its request will be received. There was a distinct mollification in his manner when next he spoke.

"Then it looks as if I can help you in some way," he said. "Shall we sit down and talk the matter over—whatever it is?"

He led the way to the same spot overlooking the sea where he and Jane and Elizabeth had had tea together on that first day of the latter's coming to Waincliff.

"So now, what's the trouble?" he asked encouragingly,

as Poppy, having seated herself in the garden chair he indicated, remained nervously silent.

"Well, I know it sounds very queer, but would you—would you"—she hesitated, then blurted out the rest of her question with a rush—"would you break off your engagement with Miss Frayne?"

Colin stared at her as though he thought she had taken leave of her senses. Then he froze perceptibly.

"I certainly would not," he replied. Adding, a note of strong indignation in his voice: "I'm afraid I don't quite understand your even asking me such a question."

"No, you wouldn't. Of course you wouldn't," agreed Poppy hastily. "Please don't be angry with me, Mr. Wentworth. It's—it's so difficult to explain. You see, Miss Frayne isn't in love with you—any more than I am."

Colin lifted his brows.

"No?"

"No. You know she isn't. She's in love with my husband—with Blair."

"Really——" He half rose from his chair, but she checked him with a gesture.

"'M, I know it sounds awful, me talking like this," she said quickly. "But it's true, what I'm saying, all the same. And I don't care whether you think it common and vulgar of me or not, I've got to say it. . . . Listen—oh, do *please* listen, Mr. Wentworth!" Her big eyes implored him, and somehow Colin found himself forgetting her commonness and vulgarity in the sheer, stark demand that vibrated in her voice and the absolute childlike candour of those beseeching eyes.

"Well, what is it? What do you want to tell me?" he said. "I—promise you I'll listen."

She drew a deep breath. Then, somehow, she tumbled it all out, the whole story of Blair's and Elizabeth's love for each other, and of how, when his engagement was broken off, Blair had married his model on a wild and reckless impulse.

"It was *my* fault," explained Poppy, in a low, shamed voice. "I know what I did. I played Delilah on him, just when he was all weak-like and wantin' to be comforted. That's how I got him to marry me—like lots of women do get men. . . . But I'd let him go now, gladly, if he could marry Miss Frayne. It—it makes me ache all over to see him so unhappy." She paused. "Mr. Wentworth, doesn't it make you ache like that, sometimes—thinking of her?"

The direct question went straight to the truth. Often enough, as he had watched the shadow which lay always in Elizabeth's eyes, he had felt just that same terrible ache of which Poppy spoke—the ache of one's own helplessness to ease the pain of someone beloved.

"Yes," he said quietly, "it does."

"Then wouldn't you give her up—so's she could marry Blair?" Poppy leaned forward, elbows on knee, her chin resting on her clasped hands, her eyes aglow with the intensity of her desire. "You and I, you see, Mr. Wentworth, we've just grabbed for ourselves. Oh, we're happy enough—in a way—'cos we've got what we wanted. But there's two other people paying for it. Couldn't you—give her up?"

"But if I did," he answered slowly—"if I did, Blair and Elizabeth are no nearer happiness. They can't marry."

"'Cos of me, you mean?" she flashed back swiftly. Then, as he nodded assent, she went on rapidly: "Oh,

Blair could get rid of me easy enough. I'd give him—grounds, don't you call it?—grounds for divorce." She laughed a little shrilly. "That's easy managed."

Colin stared at her incredulously.

"You'd do that?" he said, in amazement.

"'Course I would. It's not me that's going to be a stumbling-block in the way of Blair's being happy. No, thank you. That's not my notion of caring for anybody."

"But even then," objected Colin, "even if you did that, Elizabeth's father would never give his consent to her marrying Maitland. There are—reasons."

Poppy tossed her head scornfully.

"Oh, I can settle him," she asserted.

"I doubt it."

"And I'm sure. Maybe it won't all happen just at once. But if I straighten my part out, will you do yours—when the time comes? . . . Oh, Mr. Wentworth, please say you'd give her up! Promise you will!"

Colin had risen to his feet. He stood for a moment silently gazing out to sea. Then he turned and looked down at Poppy.

"I promise," he said quietly. "If it ever happens that only her engagement to me stands between Elizabeth and happiness—I'll release her. I gave her up once before. I can do it again."

Suddenly Poppy's face puckered up and a few big, unruly tears stole down her cheeks. Perhaps she read the depth of that renunciation in the glance of those grave hazel eyes which met her own so steadily.

"I'm *sorry,*" she said confusedly. "I—I——" Then, her voice breaking hopelessly on an uncontrollable sob, she sprang up and fled away from him, along the flagged

path that led to the house. An instant later, Sarah, busy in the kitchen premises, heard someone come in and rush like a small whirlwind through the hall and out at the front door, closing it with a bang.

But it was a very different Poppy from the tender-hearted child who had wept over Colin's sacrifice who, barely an hour later, faced Violet Frayne in the privacy of the latter's own particular sanctum at the Abbey. She had assured herself admittance by first handing in a note addressed to Mrs. Frayne, a note in which she stated that she wanted to see her in regard to a pearl necklace, but that if she were engaged she would see Mr. Frayne instead. It was cleverly thought of. Violet simply dared not refuse to see a visitor who obviously possessed some secret and dangerous knowledge of her private affairs. And when Poppy, with all the brutal candour of her class, told her in good round English the full extent of that knowledge, Violet found that it was useless to try and bluff the matter out.

Poppy informed her flatly, without any trimmings, that she was a thief and a liar, and with a sure hand plucked away the wrappings she had so carefully drawn around it and showed her her own excessively unlovely soul. It mattered nothing at all to this child of the gutter that Violet's hair was like spun gold and her eyes as blue as speedwell, nor that she was a sheltered, petted woman accustomed to cajole her way through life by sheer feminine charm. Her beauty and charm and the shrinking terror that looked out of those appealing blue eyes left Poppy quite cold. She was out for blood, fighting for the happiness of the man she loved, and, for all she cared, everyone, including herself, might go down in the general maelstrom as long as Blair's happiness was secured.

Violet broke down completely, and recognising that she was utterly in the girl's hands, flung herself on her mercy.

"You won't tell my husband, will you?" she implored wildly. "Promise me you won't! It can't make any difference to you. Promise you won't tell him."

"No, I won't tell him," replied Poppy. "Because I promised Blair I wouldn't. But *you've* got to tell him."

"I?" For a moment Violet gazed at her blankly. Then, struggling for self-control, she shrugged her shoulders. "Don't be stupid. It's not likely I should tell him, is it? . . . And I don't want you to, either. Listen, I'll give you anything you like, pay you whatever you want, if only you'll keep silent about all this."

"*Pay* me?" Poppy's scorn was limitless. "Why, I wouldn't *touch* your dirty money! There's nothing you can give me that I'd say 'thank you' for."

"Well, then, keep silent out of pity! You don't want to spoil my life, do you? Candy and I are so happy together—just as you and your husband are happy."

"But we aren't"—grimly. "That's just the point. He's got to be made happy. And you and I between us can do it. He wants to marry Miss Frayne."

"But he can't!" gasped Violet. "He's married to you."

"Huh! There's ways and ways out of marriage," retorted Poppy, "just as there's ways in. But there's no way of giving Blair back his good name except by telling the truth. And you've got to do it."

"I can't!" declared Violet shrilly. "I simply can't! Why should I spoil my own life—mine and my husband's—to please you?"

"Why? Because, as it is, you're spoiling someone

else's—spoiling *my* husband's." Poppy paused, then demanded suddenly: "How long have you been married?"

The older woman stared.

"Ten years," she said.

"Ten years! Then you've had your innings. You've had ten good years—all happy. Now you're through. It's Blair's turn—and Miss Frayne's. If you don't tell the truth now, they'll never have any happiness—never!"

"But Candy——" cried Violet wildly. "It isn't only my own happiness——"

"Mr. Frayne's had his share, too," retorted Poppy, undeterred. "He can't grumble. Oh, my God! Can't you see the injustice of it, the damn wickedness?"

The other regarded her sullenly.

"It's nothing to do with you. Why do you want to interfere?"

"Because I love Blair. That's why. And, what's more, I love him so that I'll smirch myself in his eyes, if needs be. I'll break his confidence and tell Mr. Frayne the truth myself, if you won't—though I know Blair 'ud never look at me again if I did. Still, I'd do it. . . . Only it won't be necessary. *You're* going to do it. For once in your life you're going to do the straight and decent thing. Good Lord! D'you think you're going to keep your smug respectability, *your* happiness, at the cost of Blair's and Elizabeth Frayne's? Ugh! It's like —like a slug feeding on young green leaves. You've had your time. And it's over—over, I tell you."

Bit by bit Violet's hope of moving Poppy from her determination crumbled to atoms. Alternately she stormed and pleaded, but nothing she could say or do produced the remotest impression. At length Poppy delivered her ultimatum.

"I'll give you two days to do it in. If you haven't confessed by then, I'll break my sworn word to Blair and *I* shall tell Mr. Frayne. But I'll give you the chance of telling him yourself." She paused, and regarded the other woman with a contemptuous kind of pity as she added out of an instinctive knowledge: "You'd better do it—he'll forgive you quicker that way."

After she had gone, Poppy's words reiterated themselves persistently in Violet's mind: *"He'll forgive you quicker that way."* She recognised the truth of them. She had only the choice of confessing her guilt herself or of having someone else tell Candy the whole story, and, even at this late hour, voluntary confession would count as something in her favour. There was no other way out—no other possible way. Beyond that fact, something in Poppy's stormy, passionate utterances had wakened to life within her a half-understood, belated feeling of remorse. So absorbed had she always been in procuring her own happiness, in getting the best out of life for herself, that she had never really paused to reckon the cost to other people. But Poppy's fierce denunciation had hammered a faint sense of shame even into her paltry, egotistic soul—although it was far from being commensurate with her sin. What was it she had said? *"It's like a slug feeding on young green leaves."* Violet shivered away from the essential truth of the indictment.

Presently, very slowly and reluctantly, she left her room in search of Candy. Since it had got to be, since she had no choice but to tell him the whole story of the pearl necklace, the sooner it was over and done with the better. There was no object in postponing it. Violet

felt she simply could not endure the suspense of waiting to know how he would take it.

She reached the door of his study and turned the handle with quivering fingers. Yes, he was there, writing at his desk. He looked up with a smile as she entered, with that familiar whimsical tenderness in his eyes which had never once failed her all the years they had been married—never once. She caught her breath on a sudden choking sob. Would he ever look at her again like that—when he knew? All at once, she realised that the one really true and honest thing in her own life had been her love for Candy—the one thing that really mattered, his love for her. Was it strong enough, that love of his, to stand the test which was coming to it? Or was her punishment going to be greater than she could bear?

She advanced slowly into the room. He loved her now—loved and believed in her. Would the next half-hour wipe that all out, make an end of everything that counted in life for him, and for her, too?

"I've something to tell you, Candy," she said.

CHAPTER XXX

AFTER MANY YEARS

BLAIR laid down the letter he had just received and stared blankly in front of him. He felt bewildered, almost dazed by its contents. After all these years—after all these years during which he had carried the burden of another's sin, to be suddenly cleared, vindicated! It was almost overwhelming. Moreover, the vindication had come from the last quarter whence he would have expected it to come—from the woman who had first fastened the millstone of her own guilt about his neck, and the letter which gave him his acquittal was from her husband.

Candy had written on the same day that his wife had made her confession to him—written straightly and courageously, dwelling as little as might be on his own inevitable pain and shame, but frankly expressing his admiration for what he termed Blair's "splendid and reckless action," and begging his forgiveness. It was a gallant letter—game to the last word—and Blair felt an overpowering sympathy for this man whose ideals and beliefs had been so suddenly shattered and who was facing the blow with so much pluck.

The discovery of the part played by his wife called for all Frayne's courage—and for all the tolerance and forbearance which, unconsciously to himself, the happenings of life had been gradually teaching him. Even Violet, banking, as she had done, all her hopes for the

future on his great love for her, had been secretly amazed at the way in which he had taken her confession. Candy, the one-time hasty, unforgiving, and passionately proud, had been more compassionate, dealt more gently with her, in spite of his own hurt, than she could ever have believed possible. Perhaps the memory of another woman's frailty, of Irene, and of his harshness then and all the bitter fruit it bore, helped to make his judgment merciful. Certain it was that the realisation of all that his daughter had endured to save his happiness, to keep his belief in his wife unharmed, had touched him unspeakably.

"Do you mean—that you can forgive me?" Violet asked incredulously, as he took her in his arms, when it was all over—the halting confession and the horror and the shock of it.

Candy's eyes were unwontedly soft as he answered her.

"If Elizabeth could do what she has done, bear what she has borne, for you and me, my dear, surely I can—forgive. Shall we begin all over again, Violet?"

"Will you? . . . Candy, *will* you?"

Her voice had broken on a helpless sob of wonderment. And perhaps the flood of penitence which poured through Violet's soul as, for once, she realised the fineness and heroic qualities of other natures, washed away some of the corroding rust of years of selfishness and deceit.

Blair sat very quietly in his chair, absently fingering the letter which contained his vindication. That first leaping thrill of relief—of triumph, almost—which had run like fire through his veins had subsided, to be followed by a bleak and bitter realisation of the futility of

it all. It had come too late—just six months too late! What difference did it make to him now whether he were cleared in the eyes of the world or not? Six months ago it would have made the whole difference between heaven and hell—would have carried with it the freedom to marry the woman he loved. But to-day it counted for so little—so pitifully little! It affected nothing other than his reputation. And he had lived under a cloud for so long that it really seemed to him a matter of very small importance whether his reputation were cleared or not. He was vindicated, it is true. But vindication at this late hour had turned to dust and ashes. Rather wearily he leaned his head on his hand, shading his eyes. His shoulders drooped a little. His whole attitude was that of a man defeated and beaten—a fighter at last tired out with the hopelessness of the fight.

It was thus that Poppy found him when, quarter of an hour later, she came quietly into the room. He jerked his head up sharply at the sound of her entrance, and for a moment stared at her almost unseeingly. Then the faint crackle of Frayne's letter beneath his fingers seemed to reawaken his numbed faculties.

"I've had a letter," he said slowly. "From Frayne."

A slight quiver ran through Poppy's body. It was like the repressed shudder of realisation which may run through a man who hears sentence of eternal exile pronounced upon him. Blair, engrossed in his thoughts, did not notice it. In a few brief words he told her the contents of Candy's letter.

"So you could have married Miss Frayne, after all," she said, when he had finished.

Blair was conscious of a sudden shocked sense of recoil.

"If that is all you have to say," he returned coldly, "I think it would have been better left unsaid."

She shook her head.

"No, it wouldn't," she answered swiftly. "Oh, Blair, d'you think I'm not glad—*glad* that you're cleared at last? But I want you to have more than that." With a quick, impulsive movement she flung herself down on her knees beside him. "I want you to be happy—*really* happy, like you would have been if you'd married Miss Frayne in the beginning, 'stead of me. . . . I know why you married me—just out of pity and because you were so miserable. I never ought to have let you. No"— as he tried to check her. "You must listen to me, because—because I know how it can all be straightened out. You've got to divorce me."

"Divorce you? What rubbish are you talking, child? You must be mad!"

"No, I'm not. Listen"—eagerly. "Oh, do listen! I'll make it so easy for you. I can do that, you know. It only means going back to what I was"—her face flamed scarlet. "And I'd do *that*—for you. Then you can divorce me and marry Miss Frayne, d'you see?"

Blair was silent for a moment. The utter, reckless generosity of Poppy's suggestion touched him beyond words. It was pathetic, heart-shaking in its supreme abandonment of self. And her sincerity was crystal-clear as that of a child.

At last, very gently, he took her in his arms and told her that he could accept no such sacrifice. She gazed at him with wide eyes of uttermost dismay.

"Oh, Blair, you don't mean that?" she cried. "You can't mean that!" There was a stricken, bewildered note

in her voice. All her plan for his ultimate happiness was falling to pieces.

"I do mean that," he answered quietly. "Don't think, Poppy child, that I don't realise what you're offering. I do. But I've learnt—Elizabeth has taught me—that you can't snatch happiness at someone else's expense—not even if the other person is willing to pay. And so I can't take what you offer. . . . We've made a mistake—at least, *I* have. The whole fault has been mine. All that remains is to make the best we can out of what's left. Poppy, you know I can't give you love—but I'll give you everything I can. I swear I'll do my part—try to make you happy, if you'll let me——"

He paused, to discover that she was apparently paying no attention to what he said, and the moment he ceased speaking she broke in with a swift question. It was as though it had been hovering on her lips, waiting impatiently for utterance.

"Then you absolutely refuse to divorce me?" she said. Her eyes, very bright and steady, were fixed on his.

"Absolutely."

"That's straight—final?"

"Quite final."

"I'm sorry," she said simply.

She lifted her face, and as he stooped to kiss her and felt the sudden passionate clinging of her hands round his, he made an inward vow to give her back in affection and friendship and service—in everything save that love which was not his to give—something of all that this child, this waif of the streets, had given and been willing to give to him.

CHAPTER XXXI

DAWN

A THIN rain was falling, driven hither and thither by a gusty wind, as Jack Sutherland returned from visiting a patient whose lonely cottage stood close to the shore a couple of miles beyond Wain Scar. The tide being low, he was taking a short cut home across the sands, and as he tramped along, with the big promontory ahead of him, his thoughts, prompted by the sight of that solitary house which overhung the cliff, dwelt painfully on the recent turn of events.

He alone, he reflected, had drawn happiness out of the tangle of sad happenings in which the little group of men and women who were his friends had been caught up—since, but for Colin's engagement to Elizabeth, Jane would most certainly never have been persuaded to desert her brother. But no amount of good luck for himself would ever blind Doctor Jack to the misfortunes of those he counted friends, and it was with a very sorrowful heart that he ploughed his way over the sands.

Almost unconsciously, so interwoven was it with his thoughts, his glance kept travelling upwards towards Lone Edge. The house loomed desolately bleak and bare against the leaden evening sky. It had a deserted, tenantless appearance, and for a moment he thought that Maitland and his wife must have gone back to London. Then he caught sight of something moving against the dusky grey of the background, and discerned that it was the

figure of a woman. She came out on to the terrace, and by the slenderness of her silhouette, and the red frock which he recognised as one she had worn, he knew that it must be Poppy. Poor little Poppy! Unwillingly the only stumbling-block to the happiness of the man she loved. For Sutherland was well aware that Colin would give Elizabeth her freedom to-morrow if by so doing he could ensure her happiness. Jane had told him of the interview betwixt her brother and Maitland's wife, and of the strange promise the latter had extracted from him, but even without that knowledge he would have trusted Colin. Elizabeth's happiness was the only thing that counted in the "lame dog's" life, and he would have sacrificed his own at any moment if such sacrifice could have compassed hers. But, as things were, even the freedom he could give her would avail her nothing.

Again Sutherland's glance lifted momentarily to that slender figure above him. She had descended to the ledge which jutted out far below the terrace—the ledge where Blair and Elizabeth had once stood together on a long-ago October day—and was standing with her clasped hands resting on the light hand-rail which protected it. Her face was turned wistfully seaward, towards the far horizon where the sun was sinking westward in a stormy splendour. Probably she too, was unhappy, Sutherland reflected, as he tramped along, his head bent low against the blustering wind. Surely no one could ever have imagined that so long a chain of bitter circumstance would hang from that first link forged by Violet Frayne a dozen years ago!

Suddenly, through the wind and rain came a faint, thin scream and, as it sounded, something—a slender blur of scarlet—hurtled down the grey face of the cliff.

For the fraction of a second Sutherland stood horror-stricken. Then he started to run, his heart pounding in his side.

. . . . Poppy was still alive when he reached her, but a few moments sufficed to tell him that her back was broken. He knelt beside her, looking down pitifully at the white unconscious face—child's face. And presently her eyes opened and stared tragically up at him.

"O Lord!" A mere thread of voice crept from between her lips. "Don't say I've mucked it. I've mucked most things——"

Then oblivion came down on her again. After a few minutes her eyelids quivered once more and a gleam of recognition flickered across her face.

"You'll tell folks . . . it was an accident . . . I caught my foot, doctor——"

And Sutherland, in whom so many confidences had been reposed, took this one more secret and kept it in his heart, to be shared, later on, only with the man and woman who alone had the right to share it.

"That was her gift to you," he told them quietly, when, stricken with grief and pity, they hesitated to cross the threshold of that door which Poppy's death had opened to them. "Your happiness. If you don't take it, you're making of what she did an empty sacrifice—you're throwing her life away. . . . Poppy *didn't* throw away her life—she gave it."

And suddenly it seemed to Blair that a white light shone through the darkness which had encompassed them—the white light of love and splendid sacrifice, and he realised that for him and for Elizabeth happiness had grown out of pain and renunciation, as the dawn grows out of the dark. He turned to her with questioning eyes,

to read in the tender serenity of her face that she, too, had understood.

To both of them, as they stood at last together in that sunlit freedom which had been the final gift of the woman who had loved so much, came the memory of words uttered by One Who knew to the uttermost the big values of love and life and death, One Who, understanding all, would forgive all: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

THE END

Peg Fletcher
(66)